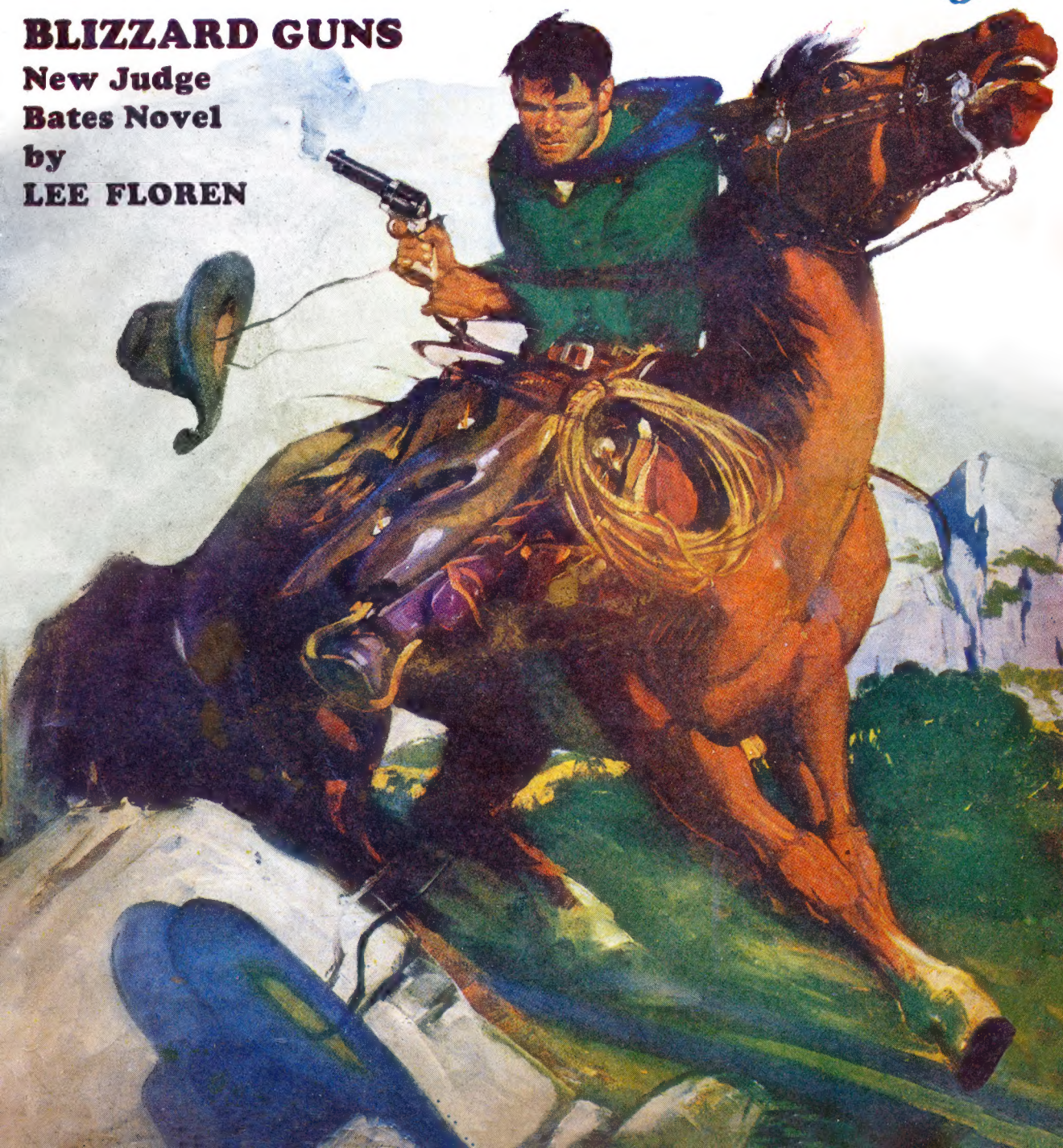
REAL WESTERN

JAN. 1948

15¢

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

BLIZZARD GUNS
New Judge Bates Novel by LEE FLOREN



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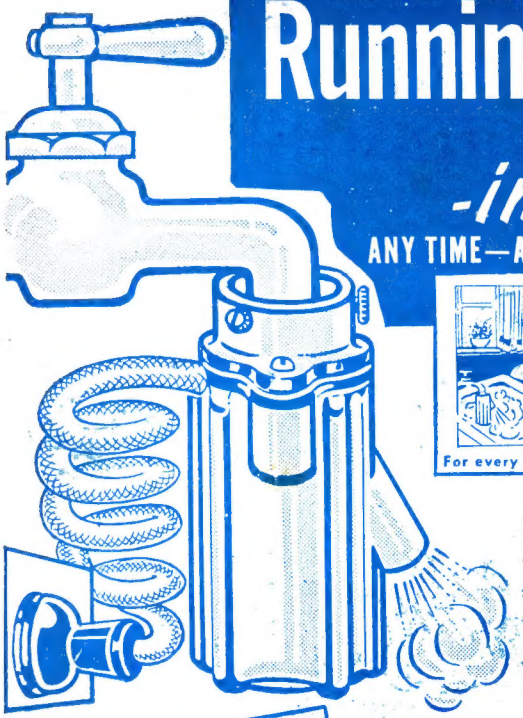

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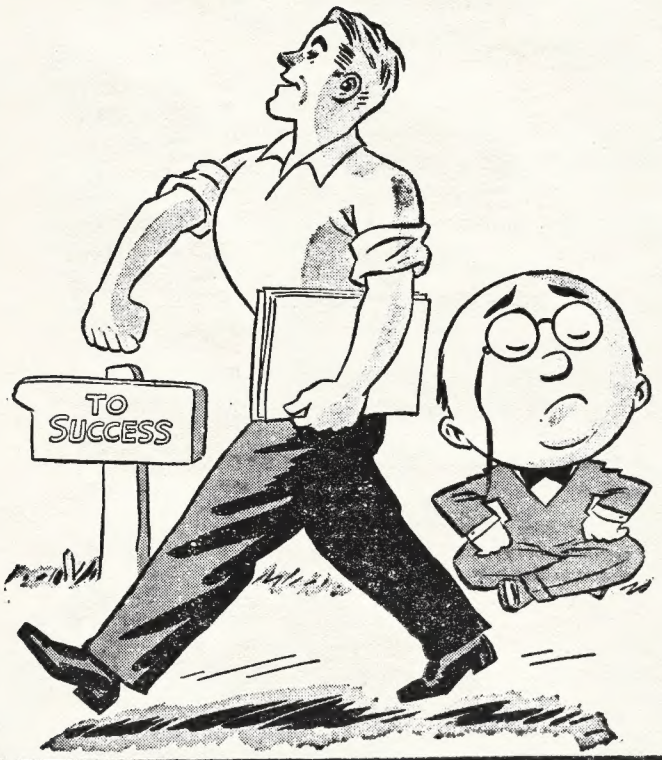
How to pass a genius



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REAL WESTERN

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Volume 13 **January, 1948** **Number 4**

BRAND NEW JUDGE BATES NOVEL

BLIZZARD GUNS ..... By Lee Floren 8

It was Judge Bates' and Tobacco Jones' duty to investigate the illegal beaver-trapping in Willow Brook — even if this meant running down an old-time friend, Muskrat Pelton, who was named in confidential government reports as the chief suspect!

SHORT STORIES

MONTANA GHOST-BUSTER ..... By Charles D. Richardson, Jr. 74

Mark Patton didn't give a hoot about the dead or their spirits—he was interested in the living, and haunts had better mind their own affairs!

GUNBAIT FOR SATAN'S CREW ..... By George H. Weldon 85

Deacon Jones wanted to keep out of this trouble that revolved around Bishop Morton, but when it got to the point he couldn't keep out of it, then the Deacon would make his influence known—with gunsmoke!

RIPPLE CREEK REDEMPTION ..... By Ben Frank 98

They made a strange pair, old Pop Tweedy and Steve Starmer—but stranger still was their influence they had on Pop's outlaw grandson.

THE REAL WEST ..... By El Amigo 107

True anecdotes of the old gold days.

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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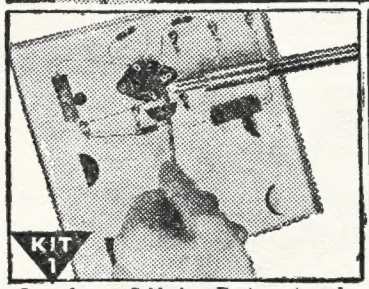

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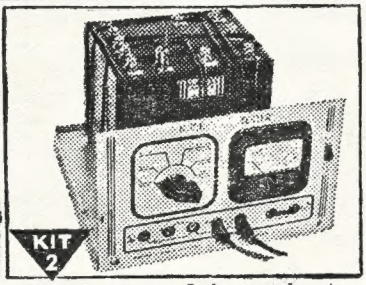

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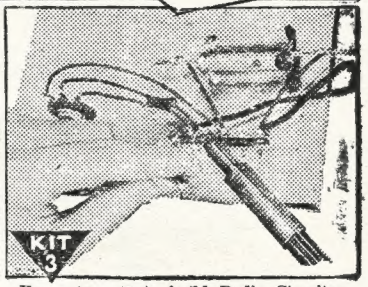
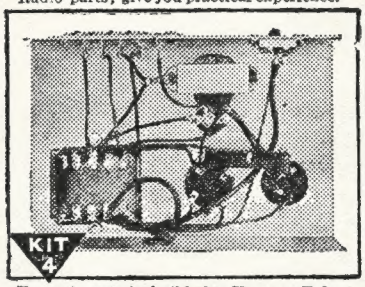
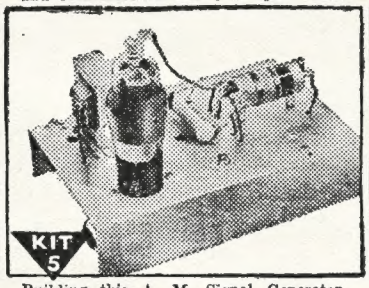


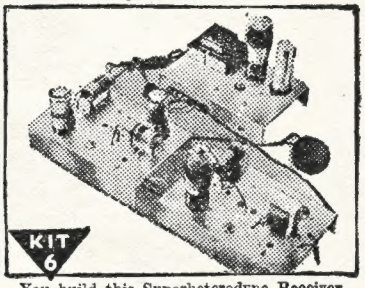
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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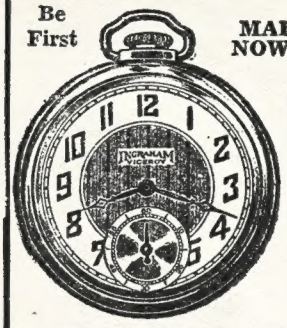

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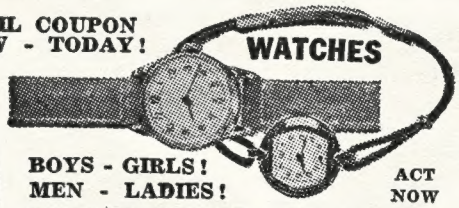

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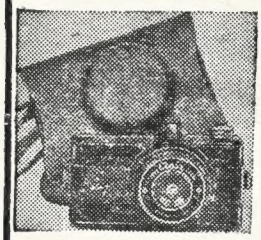

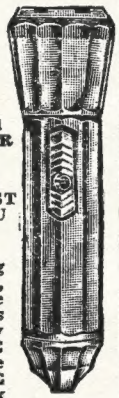

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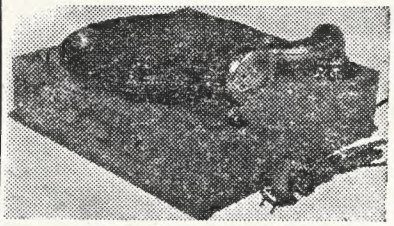

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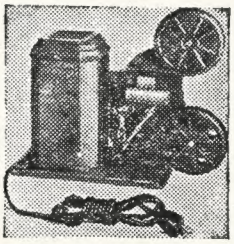

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LADIES
GIRLS

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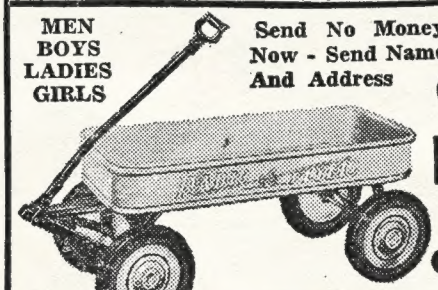

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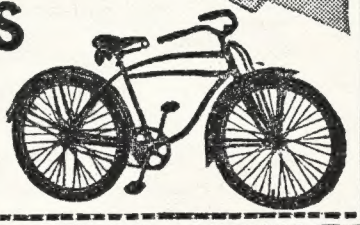

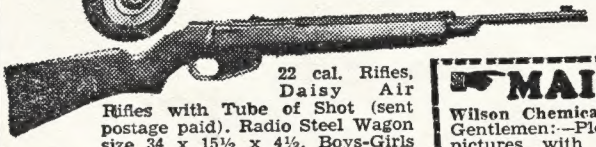

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BRAND NEW BOOK - LENGTH NOVEL

Blizzard Guns

Featuring Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones

By Lee Floren

(Author of "Gunsmoke Holiday," etc.)

Judge Bates clipped LaFevre with his jug

Illegal trapping was afoot in Willow Brook, and Judge Bates' old friend, Muskrat Pelton, was under suspicion, according to confidential federal reports. And Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones knew the task ahead of them . . . to investigate: to bring old Muskrat to justice if he were guilty, and protect him from injustice if he were not!

1

A MIGHTY shove sent the oldster lurching out of the Ace Down Saloon, splitting open the swinging doors with his speed. As the doors whipped shut behind him, he slid across the snow-covered sidewalk to skid to a stop, sitting down in the snow in front of Judge Lemanuel Bates' rearing mule.

"Whoa, Betsy, whoa!" The heavy-set judge sat deep between fork and cantle. He got his mules's forefeet down on the snow and shot a side-glance at his partner, Tobacco Jones, who was fighting his scared mule. "Ride a tight saddle, partner."

"You min' your mule, Bates, an' I'll min' mine!"

Judge Bates smiled at his partner's surly tone. The long ride from Hangton to this burg of Willow Brook had made Jones surly and angry. The jurist whipped his gaze back to the old-timer lying on the snow packed by the weight of bobsleds and the shod hoofs of mules and horses.

"You going somewhere, fellow?"

The oldster cupped his head in his hands, rocking back and forth as he sobbed. Judge Bates could not see his face, for his hands shielded his features.

"Jus' another drunk, Judge," growled Tobacco. "Been heaved out of yonder bar, prob'ly for moochin' drinks. Let's ride into the livery, rack our mules and warm our bones beside the fire in the hotel."

But Judge Lemanuel Bates was already off his mule. He was a thick man who now looked wider and shorter because of his heavy sheepskin overcoat. A muskrat-hide cap, the flaps down, was tied under his square, aggressive jaw and he wore heavy overshoes with woolen liners to keep his feet warm. Now he knelt beside the old man, his arm around the thin shoulders.

"You sick, pard?"

The man lifted his face from his hands. For the first time, Judge Bates got a good look at his wizened, battered features. Hard fists had beaten his face, and one eye was almost closed.

"Beat up— That damn killer, Frenchy La Fevre—"

"Get outa town!" growled a voice from the saloon doorway.

Kneeling there, Judge Bates looked up at the man who'd spoken. He was a heavy-set man with heavy, bole-like legs and a thick chest. The jurist ran his gaze from the hobnail boots to the thick, greasy mackinaw draped across the broad shoulders, and he let his eyes rest on the ugly, broken face with the thick, arrogant lips. Evidently this was the usual backwoods bully, he reasoned.

"You talking to me, sir?" asked the judge.

"No, I'm advisin' Limpy Rhodes there, the gent you're talkin' too. We've had too much of his lip in this saloon. Of course, if you wanta take it like I meant it for you, you can take it that way, stranger."

There was a short, tight silence. The hanger-ons, about ten of them, were grouped behind the big man, eyes on the judge and Tobacco. Tobacco looked at his partner, concern in his eyes.

"We oughta mosey on into the livery barn, Judge."

Judge Lemanuel Bates clipped his words. "You ascared of this big bag of wind, Tobacco?"

"No, but— Well, hell, they ain't no use gettin' into trouble right off the bat. They ain't no use—"

The big man had moved off the steps of the Ace Down, hobnails crunching in the packed snow. "You mean to infer I'm a big bag of wind, huh? Well, fellow, they don't talk that way about Frenchy LaFevre in Willow Brook town!"

Judge Lemanuel Bates had his legs spread wide. His tongue and his temper had gotten him in a tight spot. LaFevre outweighed him by ten or fifteen pounds, but it wasn't the advantage in weight that bothered the jurist. LaFevre was twenty years younger than he, at least, and twenty years makes a whale of difference in a rough-and-tumble fight.

And Judge Lem Bates was tired. All day he and Tobacco Jones had bucked a blizzard head-on, climbing up the other side of Solo Pass, there in the Wyoming Rockies. Wind had howled and tossed stinging granules of snow against them and their plodding mules. They had missed their dinner and now it was about two in the afternoon. He was hungry and gaunt, and only occasionl nips at his jug had kept him going.

Frenchy LaFevre ambled as he walked, heavy shoulders bobbing. Behind him a man said, "Tear him apart, Frenchy, an' feed his bones to the wolves!" The old timer at the jurist's feet rolled to one side.

"He's tough, stranger. Watch yourself!"

ANGER RAN through the corpulent jurist, giving his blood a savage lift. He wanted to walk ahead and meet LaFevre, man to man. He wanted to match his knuckles against those of LaFevre, wanted to match the skill he'd picked up in barroom fighting against the skill of LaFevre. But discretion told him otherwise. He was tired and cold and hungry;

LaFevre was fresh and strong and well-fed. So the jurist summoned a smile to his full lips.

"Now don't jump at conclusions, Mister LaFevre. Perhaps, in an excited moment, I called you a rough name. Now, sir, I wish to apologize, and I hope you accept my apologies?"

"That's better," murmured Tobacco.

Frenchy LaFevre had stopped. He was a little surprised and his small eyes showed this. They went over the Judge carefully, as though their owner doubted the words his ears heard.

"You—you trying to back outa this, stranger?" Behind LaFevre a man laughed softly. Judge Bates heard the soft, satanic laugh; he held his temper though.

"Perhaps you want to call it that sir." Judge Bates was untying his jug from his saddle-strings. He shook it and judged it almost one-half full. "I want no trouble with you. Yonder old man, evidently a drunken recluse, is of no consequence in my life. We drink to our future friendship, huh, sir?"

Judge Bates uncorked the jug.

Frenchy LaFevre was undecided. He had come out to tangle with a bobcat and that bobcat had suddenly turned into a peaceful old tabby. He He scowled, mumbled something, and then the wind, moving lazily in, sent the odor of the jug into his flat, extended nostrils. The odor made up Frenchy LaFevre's mind.

He took the jug and sniffed the whiskey. His smile grew and his piggish eyes twinkled. "Fine smellin' licker, fella. You always carry it aroun' in jug lots, huh?"

"Always, sir."

Already Frenchy LaFevre was raising the jug. "Say, me an' you could become good friends, fellow." He said something else, too, but the the gurgle of raw whiskey, tumbling across his Adam's Apple, made the words indistinct. The judge counted the bobbings of the man's Adam's Apple and the count ran to eleven before LaFevre lowered the jug. He ran his dirty palm across the spout and wiped his mouth with the back of one hairy hand.

"Good brew, stranger."

"Cooked it myself." Judge Bates said. He took back the jug, drank deeply and sighed. "The Lord's nectar, given to man if he will brew it!" He seemed jocular on the surface but Tobacco Jones, still sitting on his mule, chewed his tobacco thoughtfully, and studied his partner. Tobacco had never seen the judge back away from a fight before, and he was rather surprised. He had slipped the mitten from his right hand and now that hand rested on his .45 in its holster under his mackinaw.

"Fine drink," agreed Frenchy.

"Another one, sir?" asked Bates.

"Now don't care as if I do. But if you insist."

"I insist, sir."

Frenchy LaFevre was reaching for the jug again. Suddenly Judge Bates stared wildly at a man standing in the Ace Down's doorway ."Hey, that gent's got a gun - LaFevre, watch out!"

LAFEVRE pivoted swiftly for a man his size. As he turned, the back of his head swiveled around. It and the jug collided sharply and LaFevre went down, falling in the snow. And Judge Lemanuel Bates grinning widely, rubbed his hand affectionately across the polished surface of the jug.

"Good work, Betsy," he murmured.

The action had been so swift that it stunned the onlookers. Now LaFevre lay in the snow, knocked cold, and Judge Bates was standing there, grinning like a well-fed tomcat.

"He was too trusting," he told Tobacco. "Hades, there wasn't a man with a gun in the doorway."

"We all know that," muttered Tobacco Jones. He had his .45 out and his jaw was working very slowly on his chewing tobacco. "Get on that mule, Bates, afore this misbegotten son comes to an' clamors for fistic action."

"Nicely said." Judge Bates found his stirrup and lifted his bulk into leather. "You can holster that weapon, partner. There seems to be no danger in yonder bunch of jackasses."

"Never can tell."

Nevertheless gaunt Tobacco Jones holstered his weapon, hangdog face without expression. The oldster climbed out of the snow and got on shaky pins, brushing snow from him. "I wanna thank you two gents. My handle's Limpy Rhodes. Got a hitch sometimes in my leg."

"We'll be around town for sometime, Limpy."

The oldster looked at LaFevre, still unconscious. "I'm gettin' outa here before he comes to." He scampered down the street, moving like a scared prairie chicken through the sagebrush.

The judge and Tobacco rode into the livery barn. The hostler swung the door shut behind them. They got down in the darkened interior of the barn. The smells of sweaty horses and fresh manure were sharp in their nostrils.

"Lead your mules thisaway, men."

They walked down the passageway between stalls. Broncs munched on oats and native bluejoint hay. The man stopped in front of a double stall. "Unstrip them an' shove 'em in this stall."

He was a short, skinny fellow, and the judge figured he was about fifty. His eyes kept straying to the judge's jug as he stood and watched the partner's unsaddle their mules. Judge Bates hung his saddle, jug and all, over the saddle-rack. The fellow's eyes lighted for he evidently figured the judge would leave the jug on his saddle.

Judge Bates grinned, amused at the man's apparent thirst. He tied his mule with, "Water him in about an hour, sir, after he's got a good foundation of hay in his belly. You'll feed them plenty?"

"That I will, stranger. No man can say that Timothy O'Rourke ever let an innercent beast starve." He glanced at the jug again.

Tobacco started for the door. "Me for some hot chuck, Bates."

The judge followed him. He made it look like he had forgotton his jug. He got almost to the door when he with, "Say, I'm forgetting my jug."

Timothy O'Rourke's tongue jerked back in. The look suddenly left his faded blue eyes and they were so pathetic the judge almost had to laugh. He untied his jug and O'Rourke's tongue came out to wet his cracked lips.

"You got whiskey in there, stranger?"

"Sure have."

"That jug'll hol' a lot, won't it?"

"No, it's only a gallon jug."

"Oh, I see."

Tobacco and the judge walked outside. Tobacco growled, "Funny you didn't give that old souse a drink. Ain't like you, Bates, to make a man drool at the mouth. Here we come into town peaceful-like an' right off an' ol' drunk gets us into trouble. That LaFevre son ain't goin' forgit you layin' him cold in the snow."

"Maybe you're right, partner."

2

THE SPACE in front of the Ace Down Saloon held no men. Evidently they had taken Frenchy LaFevre into the bar to bring him to. Judge Bates grinned, remembering how quickly LaFevre had fallen; his legs had gone out from under him like he'd been shot through the heart.

Well, he'd have a headache, when he came to—that is, if there was anything to ache in his skull. The partners crossed the street, overshoes crunching on the packed snow braced against the cold wind. The judge glanced at a thermometer on a building. Around zero, huh?

"This looks like a good joint to feed the inner man in," said Tobacco. "What say we turn into this chow parlor, Bates?"

"You're the boss, Tobacco."

It was warm in the cafe. A counter ran toward the rear of the narrow room and a pot-bellied heater glowed, its sides red from the hot lignite coal inside. Judge Bates whiffed the air and spoke to the girl behind the counter.

"Cinnamon in the air, miss. Somebody is baking an apple pie?"

She had a cheery smile. "That's right, sir. And would you like a V of it."

"That I would, miss. But first I want a big T-Bone steak, with plenty of spuds. Could you fill the bill?"

"We sure could."

"Two of 'em," grunted Tobacco.

The girl went through the swinging doors into the kitchen, the jurist admiring her back. He sighed and said, "Oh, how I'd like to be twenty again." He deposited his jug on the floor beside his stool and unloosened his mackinaw. "I appreciate that fire, Tobacco."

Tobacco's long face was sorrowful. "Wonder where ol' Muskrat Pelton is, Bates? You don't happen to figger he's in this town of Willow Brook, do you?"

"I doubt his being in town. Peltry is at its finest now, and he is evidently out on the creeks, setting lairs for marten and muskrats and mink." Bates shook his head with a great slowness. "It seems hardly possible that Muskrat can be poaching State beavers, Tobacco. I know the old man well—so do you, for that matter—and it seems illogical he could do such a thing."

Tobacco rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "But the signs all point that way, Judge. Me, I can't hardly believe it, either."

They sat there, soaking in the heat, busy in thoughts. Outside the January wind whistled in the eaves of the building. Judge Bates uncorked his jug and drank, while Tobacco chewed silently. Now and then the gaunt man splattered the spittoon with brown tobacco juice.

They had been almost a week on the trail from Cowtrail, about two hundred miles to the southwest. Now they were almost on the Montana-Wyoming line. They had bucked snow and blizzards most of the way across the mountains. A storm had forced them to hole up for a day in Thermopolis.

Both of them were tired. But they had set themselves doggedly on the trail and doggedly they had kept their leg-weary mules forging ahead. They had taken mules because mules were more sure-footed than horses on the mountain passes.

But beaver pelts were being shipped out of this section of Wyoming, were being smuggled into the fur-trading center of St. Louis, Missouri. The judge had learned this accidentally one day while reading a report sent out from the Federal office in St. Louis.

THE COUNTY judge of Cowtrail, Bates sometimes sat as a Federal judge; therefore, he received notices from the Federal headquarters. He had thumbed through the report, wondering why the government would waste time and paper printing such a voluminous paper. They could have summed the whole lot of information on one page instead of wasting so much paper.

Suddenly, he had stopped mumbling, and read with careful attention that, according to federal game wardens, beaver pelts were being smuggled out of Wyoming into St. Louis. So far, federal game wardens hadn't made any progress in the case, but it seemed, according to the reports, that the furs were coming from the vicinity of Willow Brook, Wyoming.

The information, of course, was very confidential. Suspects were named in the report. Further investigation showed that these suspects clear of suspicion. One other suspect remained. His name, the report said, was Muskrat Pelton. Federal men did not know his real name; all they knew him by was Muskrat—for his given name had evidently been forgotten, even by Muskrat Pelton himself.

Judge Bates had called Tobacco Jones into his chambers, and had read the report to his partner. When he had finished, Tobacco Jones' long face had been as red as a turkey-gobbler's waddles.

"That cain't be true, Bates! Hades, me an' you an' ol' Muskrat was growed up together, back in the midwest. Ol' Muskrat ain't no damn' beaver poacher. He respects the laws of the Lord an' of Man."

Judge Bates had walked to the window. Outside the storm had beaten against the courthouse and spiralled snow along the sidewalk. His heavy jowls were hard with his sudden

thoughts.

Tobacco had stated it a little incorrectly. Old Muskrat Pelton had not grown up with them, for Pelton had been a man when they'd been kids. Let's see the old trapper was about sixty-five, anyway, wasn't he? Funny fellow, old Muskrat. But a good trapper. One of the best, they'd heard.

Two years before, Muskrat Pelton had visited them, here in Cowtrail. He had talked about starting a trapping-company up around Willow Brook. He was getting too old, he said, to buck the drifts himself; he'd start a company and hire trappers and outfit them.

The judge had found amusement in the proposition, although, of course, he did not tell this to Muskrat Pelton; the oldster had been fiercely engrossed in his plan. But Muskrat was no business man. He lacked the business head to run a fur company. But the judge had encouraged him, thinking it only a passing whim.

For a year they had not heard from the old trapper. Then, last spring, a letter had come, addressed to both of them, and bearing the postmark of the Willow Brook postoffice. Tobacco Jones had picked it out of the incoming mail in his postoffice and personally carried it to Judge Lemanuel Bates.

"From Muskrat Pelton, judge."

The jurist had been tired, for the court session was on. He had read the letter aloud: the trapping season had been a good one with plenty of mink fishers, muskrats and coyotes; the company was getting along good; his daughter was coming to live with him.

"Never knew he had a daughter," said Tobacco.

Judge Bates had laid the letter on the table. "I mind him mentioning his daughter to me. Well, good luck, Muskrat. But I sure never figured he could organize, and run, a fur company."

"Maybe his daughter is running it?"

"Maybe so."

Now here was a Federal notice, accusing Muskrat Pelton of beaver trapping. For with beaver rapidly becoming a thing of the past, the Federal government had moved in, stopping all trapping of the broad-tailed, fine-furred water-animal.

"Only way a man can legally trap beaver," Judge Bates had said, "is to get a permit from the Federal gamewarden. Records show that no such permit has been issued to anybody in the Willow Brook region. Yet federal men are positive the furs come from that section."

"We'd better get to Willow Brook," Tobacco said.

Business was slack in the postoffice. His assistant, Tobacco said, could take care of the postoffice until he got back. And court session was almost five months away, for the winter session had just ended. There was nothing holding either of them to Cowtrail.

"Only the storm," said the Judge.

Tobacco had bit off a chew. He'd looked around the room anxiously for a spittoon but found none. "Hell of an office," he grumbled. "Not a spittoon in it. Why don't the county buy you a couple, Bates? We pay enough taxes into the county office to put a golden spittoon in every office."

"They mess up the place. They're dirty."

Tobacco had deliberately spat on the floor. "Not near as dirty as that foul-smellin' jug of your'n. After all, you invited me over here, didn't you?"

"If I did, I'm sorry."

Tobacco had eyed him suspiciously. He didn't know whether the jurist was joking, or if he was serious. He eyed the storm sullenly. "I'll be be ready in an hour, Bates." He tromped out.

NOW THESE thoughts came rushing across Judge Bates' memory as he chewed on his steak. The waitress returned to her book beside the stove. Back in the kitchen the cook rattled his pots and pans.

"Swell steak," said Tobacco.

"Glad you found something you like."

Tobacco glanced at his partner, then let the matter drop. The lanky man chewed on a spud and crammed a forkful of steak in on top of the

potato. Jaws bulging, he washed the conglomeration down with hot coffee.

Judge Bates gave himself up to further thought. There would be a Federal game-warden on these trapping grounds, he knew, for the Federal circular had said a game-warden was going into Willow Brooks. The gravity of the situation made a fine line form on his high forehead.

What if he and Tobacco were wrong? What if old Muskrat were really trapping beaver? What if the oldster had succumbed to the lure of easy, but illegal, money? Beaver pelts were really worth money on the market, good medium-sized pelts drew around twenty dollars in St. Louis.

And, if a man got in good trapping country, he could catch at least ten beaver a night. Come morning he could pull up his traps, take their peltry, and be across the ridge, miles away, by noon. He could skin in some remote mountain valley and throw the carcasses to the wolves and coyotes, which would eradicate all evidence of the crime.

But how would he get the beaver pelts to St. Louis? Ship them by mail out of the railhead? But Federal men were watching the mails for beaver peltry. There was much here that Judge Bates didn't understand.

He and Tobacco had talked it over on the trail, arriving at a plan of action. They would not tell old Muskrat they were secretly investigating the alleged beaver trapping. For if he were the guilty trapper, that information would put him immediately on guard, and they would probably find out exactly nothing. They would tell him they had come to help him trap for a week or so and visit with him.

That didn't look logical, either. For who comes to visit a man in the mid of winter, traveling almost two hundred miles across blizzard-ridden ranges? If Muskrat Pelton were really the guilty party, would he be suspicious of them?

Somberly Judge Bates forked a hunk of steak. Even if Muskrat were guilty he would not suspect him and Tobacco Jones, for they were not game-wardens. The old trapper would think it odd that they had chosen to visit him during the blizzard season, and probably let it go at that.

He kept remembering Limpy Rhodes. Evidently Limpy was a trapper, judging from his garb. The thought of Limpy brought Frenchy LaFevre's homely mug to mind.

LaFevre would be his enemy from here out. He was dead sure of that. He had tricked Frenchy LaFevre, knocked him cold; LaFevre would never forget that. Judge Bates knew Frenchy's kind never forgot a grievance.

Therefore LaFevre was put down in a mental book as a man well worth watching. What had LaFevre and Limpy been fighting about? If it could be called a fight—for tough LaFevre, big and strong, surely must have made short work of Limpy. The way the old trapper had sailed through the doors of the Ace Down Saloon convinced the jurist that LaFevre had bodily thrown him outside.

Well, they'd look up old Muskrat. He'd clear up this set-up for them. Not that it really made much difference.

The next time LaFevre moved against him, Judge Bates would hit him with something other than a whiskey jug. That would be either his knuckles or a .45 slug.

Tobacco shoved back his plate. "A fine meal, Bates."

The waitress left her book to fill their coffee cups again.

"Quiet town," said Judge Bates.

"Trappers are almost all out on trap-lines," the girl said. "On Saturdays the town shows a little life. But not much for some trappers do not come until spring when the season is over."

"Who is this Frenchy LaFevre?"

"He works for Milt Jefferson, who runs sheep out on Mule Deer Creek—the Box ranch. He is also head of a few trappers, and they call themselves the Mountain Empire Fur Association." She wiped the counter carefully. "Jefferson's Mountain Empire, humph!"

"High falutin' name," Tobacco grunted.

"Quite a combination," the judge allowed. "Sheep and furs. This

Frenchy LaFevre been in this section long?"

"No, not long." Red lips pursed in thought. "About a month, I'd say. He went to work for Milt Jefferson right after he got here." She seemed hesitant. "Weren't you the man who knocked him down sir?"

The judge smiled. "I claim that dubious honor."

"You should've killed him!" Her voice was suddenly fierce. "Any man who would work for Milt Jefferson is a dog, a human dog!"

The severity of her voice surprised the judge. Then a harsh voice, coming from the doorway that led to the street, also gave him a surprise.

"You two men are under arrest!"

3

THREE MEN had entered the cafe. The man who spoke was a lanky, homely individual, with loose lips and watery eyes. He had his sheepskin coat unbuttoned and he had the left side of it pulled back to reveal the sheriff-star pinned to his dirty flannel shirt.

The other was a short, swarthy man with a full face, marked with a dark hardness. He wore a long sheepskin coat and overshoes and a beaver cap was on his head, the ear-flaps untied and dangling. Behind him stood Frenchy LaFevre, who glared at Judge Bates with undisguised anger.

The judge pulled his gaze back to the sheriff. He had to grin at the melodramatic way the lawman held his coat open to show his star. Judge Bates mopped his bread around his plate, soaking up his gravy. Apparently he had no interest in the three men who stood in the doorway.

"Now what t'hades is this?" wondered Tobacco.

"You two men," the sheriff repeated, "are under arrest."

"Your arm must be getting tired," said Judge Bates. "Why don't you lower it, friend? We've seen stars before."

"When I get my hands on you," growled Frenchy LaFevre, "you'll see more, fat man! An' I'm the gink who'll make you see stars, too!"

The swarthy man rapped out, "Forgit that talk, Frenchy! That ain't goin' get you no place. Sheriff Webster, Frenchy has filed out a warrant, chargin' that heavy man with arrest. Are you goin' serve that warrant?"

"Don't rush me, Milt Jefferson. I'm the law here, not you." Then, to Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones. "Comin' peaceful, or do I have to handcuff you?"

"What's the charge?" asked the jurist.

"Disturbing and bustin' the peace, man. When you busted Frenchy over the head, you broke the peace."

"But what about my partner? You can't file a warrant for his arrest? He just watched us."

"He had his gun out, they tell me!" Frenchy LaFevre growled the words.

Judge Bates noticed that Frenchy had added, *they tell me*, and that made him smile. He glanced at Tobacco, who was scowling. The jurist looked at Milt Jefferson, remembering what the pretty waitress had said about the man.

"Well?" demanded Sheriff Webster.

The judge got to his feet. "We'll go," he said.

Tobacco came off the stool with, "Hades, we get in this jail, Bates, an' they'll throw away the key! We'll rot in there. An' have they a legal right to hold us on such a charge?"

Sheriff Webster had overheard the postmaster. "You gents ain't the ones to determine the legality of this arrest. That's up to Judge Emil Simpson. You two fellas don't know nothin' about the law. Now get movin' toward the calaboose."

The sheriff and his party stood to one side as the partners walked to the cash register. There Judge Bates paid their bill. The waitress rang up the money, her lips tembling.

"Good luck, sir," she said, giving him his change.

Judge Bates patted her hand fatherly. "There's nothin' here that makes me worried, miss. See you at breakfast, uh?"

"You won't see her," growled Frenchy LaFevre. "She don't deliver

chuck to the jail-house!"

Milt Jefferson spoke. "Can that talk, Frenchy."

Judge Bates smiled. "We have the right to consult an attorney, Sheriff Webster. I want to write a note to Judge Simpson, too."

"Go ahead." Webster looked at Jefferson. "That's all right an' legal, ain't it, Milt?"

"Yes, I think so."

Tobacco glared at the lawman. "Jefferson do your thinkin' for you, too, Webster? An' along with that, he orders you aroun', huh?"

Sheriff Webster glared through watery eyes. "None of your lip, you long string-bean! I run my office an' you run your mouth, an' we'll both get along okay. Savvy that?"

TOBACCO JONES' lips were tight. He had stopped chewing and his jaws were clamped on his eating-tobacco. Judge Bates read this as a danger sign. He knew what was bothering the lanky postmaster.

Down at the hotel, there was a pot-bellied stove crammed with Wyoming lignite, and that stove would be casting out a friendly, glowing heat. There'd be hot water for a shave in front of a clean mirror in a warm room. But they weren't going to the hotel; they were headed for the calaboose.

"Hold your temper, friend." Judge Lem Bates purred the words. "Depend on me, Tobacco, and take it easy. Put some slack in your tugs." He had finished his note and he slid off the stool, putting his pencil away and folding the small piece of paper. "Now to find a small boy to deliver this to His Honor," he said.

"I'll take it to Judge Simpson," said the waitress. She was slipping into her coat and pulling on her overshoes.

"Thank you kindly, miss."

Jefferson said, "Read the note, Webster."

"That legal, Milt?"

"Read it."

Webster read aloud:

Dear Emil:
Your half-cracked sheriff and his boss, Milt Jeffeson, are going to put my partner and me in jail. For the sake of old time friendship, I ask you to hie yourself to the jail immediately, or I shall be forced to sue your sheriff, Jefferson, and even your Court, for false arrest and imprisonment.
An Old Friend

"Dear Emil," croaked Frenchy LaFevre. "What is this, anyway? An' he signs it an ol' fren', too."

Sheriff Webster was growling under his breath. "An' he refers to Milt here, being my boss! That's a lie, mister. I wear no man's collar."

"Don't look that way to me," grumbled Tobacco.

Webster said, "I ain't gonna let you send Judge Simpson this note. You gotta scribble a new one, a respectable one. Jus' who do you figure you are, anyway? What is your handle, fat man?"

The judge handed the note to the girl. She ran out the back way with it. Sheriff Webster stepped forward, evidently to head her off, and Tobacco's right foot came out, ready to upset the lawman. But Webster stopped in time. Tobacco pulled his overshoe back hurriedly.

"I'm fed up!" snarled Webster. "I've hit the end of my rope with you two!" He pulled an old .45 out from under his coat. "Get to the calaboose, both of you! Hurry, you two hellions!"

They went outside. Milt Jefferson spoke to the lawman. "I'll get an attorney to file particular charges, Ed. He'll be over in a short while." He went across the street with Frenchy LaFevre trailing him.

Tobacco watched the pair. "Nothin' so touchin' as a man an' his dog," he murmured. "The dog follerin' the man, trottin' behin' him through the snow, his tongue ready to lave the man's muddy boots."

"What's that?" demanded Sheriff Webster.

"You ain't got no call to horn into my musin's. My thoughts are my own,

fella, even if you do wear a badge. You're makin' yourself unpopular with us two."

"I cain't help it, men. I gotta do my duty. Jefferson swored out a warrant, an' my oath of office says I have to fulfill my legal obligations. Get movin' toward that calaboose, fella."

THE JAIL WAS at the far end of the court-house, a log building set in a square at the foot of Main Street. Half the town came out to see Sheriff Ed Webster herd his two prisoners toward the jail. They stood in front of stores and business establishments and looked from windows and doorways.

"This burg," stated Tobacco, spitting into the snow, "is even more inquisitive than Cowtrail, an' I bet it has jus' as much loose gossip aroun' it, too."

Judge Bates nodded.

"You figure Emil Simpson will come to our help?"

"I figure so."

"Maybe you should've signed that note?"

Judge Bates shook his head.

They clomped across the floor in the office, the door shutting out the cold. Two cells were in the log room behind the office. Here it was dark for the only light came through the two small barred windows set high in the walls. Judge Bates found his eyes were slow in becoming accustomed to the dull light. He still couldn't see very clearly by the time Sheriff Webster got them in a cell and clanged the steel dor shut on them.

The sheriff clomped up the bull-pen and into the office, shutting the door behind him. The round heater out in the bull-pen kept the cells warm and comfortable. Tobacco started stripping off his overcoat.

"Might jus' as well make ourselves at home," he grunted.

"Yeah, do that," a voice said.

Judge Bates turned. A skinny man, a little stoop-shouldered, stood in the next cell, his gnarled knuckles gripping the upright bars. There in the dim, uncertain light he had a woebegone, hangdog appearance.

"As I live to drink liquor," said Judge Lem Bates, "if it isn't my old friend, Muskrat Pelton! And in jail, too. And yonder, sitting on that cot, is the man known as Limpy Rhodes, isn't it? Or are my eyes deceiving me?"

"This is me, pal."

Tobacco stared, mouth open. "What you doing in this calaboose, Muskrat? Hades, we figured you was out with your traps, out along the crick!"

Muskrat Pelton had quite a story to tell. That morning, he had elbowed French LaFevre, down in the Ace Down, and they had a fight. Jefferson had sworn out a warrant for him, arresting him for starting the battle.

"And did you start it, Muskrat?" Judge Bates asked.

Muskrat Pelton's loose mouth had a funny twitch to it. "Yeah I started it. I planted a fist-full of knuckles into his mug. Then Limpy here—Limpy's my pard—he come into town an' took up where I left off."

"That's where we came in," grunted the judge.

Limpy spoke. "This fat gent knocked out Frenchy, Muskrat. Hit him hell a-clonkin' with his jug. Where is that jug at now, fellla?"

The jurist told him the sheriff had it out in his office. Already his mouth watered for a drag of the whiskey, but he held his thirst as he listened to Muskrat Pelton's story.

Two years before, Milt Jefferson had moved sheep in on Willow Brook range, settling out on Mule Deer Creek. That winter he had gone into trapping. Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes had just been starting their fur company. They went out into open competition with Milt Jefferson.

"But he got the jump on us right off, Bates.' Limpy Rhodes rubbed his battered lips. "Him, he had more money backin' him—he sol' a good lamb crop that year—an' me an' Muskrat had to start from scratch. Well, we made purty good. Then Jefferson had his trappers come into our trappin' country an' we had some fist-fights. Hell, we ain't no fighters—tuh ol' to scrap—but we put up as much as we could. Now we're both in the clink. An' don't know when we'll get out!"

"You'll get out," the jurist assured. "I'll get you out on a writ of habeus corpus."

"But you're in the clink, too," de clared Limpy.

Tobacco spat on the floor. His homely face showed a puzzled frown "But I don't know about Judge Emil Simpson comin', Bates. 'Member, you only signed that letter, 'An Ol' Friend.' You know the judge purty good?"

"Well enough, partner. Although I do not admire his scruples. I beat him rather severely on a big legal case once, Shanley vs. Rumbster. We were both practicing law then, prior to our promotion to the Bench. Oh, I think he'll come."

"Why didn't you sign your full name?" Tobacco wanted to know.

"I wanted to keep our presence a secret. I wanted to keep our identities unknown."

"Why?" demanded Muskrat.

The judge had once had the plan that he and Tobacco would work in secret here on Willow Brook range, and thereby possibly do more work in less time and find out who was poaching beavers. But he saw now that plan had been foolish, for Muskrat Pelton would have revealed their identities to the local people. He had a loose, talkative tongue, especially when drinking. And, also, Judge Emil Simpson would have recognized him. But he was determined on one point: Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes need not know he and Tobacco had come into Willow Brook to investigate illegal beaver-trapping.

For maybe the pair, although Muskrat was their old friend, were trapping beaver and breaking federal laws. And if Muskrat found out that he and Tobacco were here to investi gate—

"Jus' a whim, Muskrat. Fact is, me and Tobacco wanted to surprise you. Well, we did, didn't we?"

"I'll say you did."

Out in the office, the sheriff was talking to somebody who had just entered. The four of them listened. They could hear the sheriff's voice but the newcomer did not speak loud enough for them to hear.

"Must be Judge Simpson," grumbled Limpy.

The door to the office opened and a lone figure came down the bullpen toward the cells.

"Hades, that ain't the judge, be it?" asked Tobacco.

Judge Bates spoke. "The girl from the cafe."

4

THE GIRL STOPPED in front of the cell, hands gripping the bars. "He won't come, sir." She spoke to Judge Lemanuel Bates. "He said he wouldn't come. And he said he didn't want me to ever to bring him a note from a drunken, fighting bum!"

Her voice was shaking.

Tobacco swore, then said, "Excuse me ma'am." He bit off a chew and spat angrily. Limpy Rhodes sat on his bunk, staring at his overshoes. Muskrat Pelton stared at Judge Bates, his adam's apple bobbing.

"You didn't mention sendin' Mabel for Judge Simpson, Bates!"

Judge Bates looked at him sourly. "Do I have to account to you for all I do, Pelton?"

"But Mabel—she's my daughter. Mind that letter I sent you, sayin' my girl was comin' to Willow Brook?"

The judge's good humor returned. He put his chubby hands over Mabel's. "Honey, I knowed your daddy even before you did, and he was just as homely then as he is now. How he could ever be father to a girl as pretty as you are—" He shook his head slowly. "I just can't believe it."

"Her mother was a beauty," assured Muskrat Pelton. "She inherited her mother's looks and my brains. Lord rest her mother's bones." His face was heavy with the imprint of past thoughts. "When I lost her, the sun lost its beauty to me."

Mabel was sobbing a little. Judge Bates patted her on the shoulder. "There, there, honey, don't cry. After all, Mabel, you're not behind bars—we are! We should be the ones to bawl."

"You introduce yourselves to my daughter?" asked Muskrat.

"We never had time."

The old trapper introduced the judge and Tobacco with grandiose gestures, emphasing his long friendship with the pair, how they had come all the way from Cowtrail to visit with him.

"To land in jail," finished Tobacco.

Mabel wiped her tears away with the corner of her apron. "That old—old—billy-goat! He lectured me severely, Judge Bates. Told me that I wasn't keeping fit company, if my friends went to jail, and that I should be careful to pick better company in the future. Oh, why, oh, why, didn't you sign your name to that note?"

"A wild idea," murmured the judge.

The girl turned. "I'm going back there and tell Judge Simpson who you are, and then he'll run over here like a bee-stung goat! That's what I'll do! I'll have the last laugh, I will."

She ran into the office, slamming the door behind her.

"Now we'll get some action," growled Limpy Rhodes.

They waited an hour. Mabel came again. "He won't come, Mr. Bates. He thinks I'm lying to him! The old—"

"Here, here," murmured the judge. "No harsh words, honey. Go back to your cafe and go to your regular work. Just spread word around town that Judge Bates is in jail. Then, when Judge Simpson gets that gossip, it will start him to thinking. And by that time we'll be out of jail."

"How?"

"Well find a way, Mabel."

The girl was undecided; her face showed her uncertianty. Muskrat Pelton cut in with, "Do as Hizzoner says, daughter. Be a good girl now. Do it for your old pappy."

"Yeah," growled Muskrat. "How we gonna bust outa here?"

"All right, dad."

She left.

Tobacco glared at the judge. "You sure bungled things, huh? How you goin' get outa this hen-house?"

"We have busted outa better jails than this." Judge Bates was smiling. "I had a man break out of my jail in Cowtrail, chiseling his way through rock and mortar to freedom, and using his belt-buckle to make his break. But we won't destroy the jail, men."

"How then?" taunted Tobacco Jones.

"Wish I had my jug."

"How?" repeated Tobacco.

Judge Bates sat down on the cot. "You are worse than an old woman, my friend. Sometimes I wonder why I stand for your sharp tongue and uncouth ways. How much brains do you figure our friend, Sheriff Ed Webster, possesses?"

"He's no friend of mine, Bates." Tobacco worried his chew thoughtfully. "Well, I don't know how they measure brains, whether in pounds or pints, but I'd say he's about one-half there."

"Nah, more than that." Limpy Rhodes' small eyes were sharp. "About three-quarters, I figger."

"No more'n that," Muskrat Pelton put in.

Judge Bates wiped his lips and again thought of his jug. "Well, here we are, four men. All supposed to have our mental capacities to one-hundred percent, at the least. The odds are with us by over five to one aren't they?"

Limpy Rhodes nodded, eyes shoe-button sharp. Muskrat Pelton studied the jurist. But lanky Tobacco Jones was still skeptical.

"Maybe we got four-hundred percent, Bates, an' he has seventy-five percent—but how come he's not behin' bars, then, an' we are?"

"You are too realistic, Tobacco. My friend, what you need is a little imagination to color your thoughts. We wait an hour or so and if Judge Emil Simpson has not arrived by then we play our ace."

"Have we got one?" scoffed Tobacco.

THEY SAT on their bunks, silent and with thoughts. Outside the darkness was coming down and the stove was losing its heat. They heard the door to the Sheriff's office open and close and overshoes crunched on the packed snow outside, the sound coming through the small, barred win-

dows.

Judge Bates called, "That you, Sheriff?"

The overshoes stopped. "Who's callin' me?"

"Me, in here. In the cell. Sheriff, it's getting cold in here. Why not restoke the stove, and bring us some chuck?"

"Ah, close your mouth."

The overshoes continued on and their crunch became lost in distance. Tobacco spat out the window. "Nice good-natured public servant, that gent."

Judge Bates had no answer, neither did Limpy Rhodes or Muskrat Pelton. Half an hour later, the sheriff came back, another man with him. The sheriff carried two trays of grub, handling them awkwardly, but the other man handled his trays like a veteran waiter. Judge Bates recognized him as the cook in Mabel Felton's cafe.

"You get poisoned on this chuck," grumbled Sheriff Webster, "an' you ain't got nobody to blame it on but your daughter, Muskrat."

"Hope she put a file in that big hunk of cake," Judge Bates said.

Webster studied him coldly. "Fellow, you ain't got enough respect for the law. I done seen a lawyer an' he's comin' over this evenin' to see you two. Judge Emil Simpson is settin' tomorrow mornin' as the preliminary trial for all of you four. Fat man, there's a nutty rumor goin' aroun' that you're Judge Lemanuel Bates."

"Wonder who started that?" marvelled the judge.

"I dunno; don't care, neither. But somebody sure has got his eyes twisted, Hell, I've met Judge Bates a number of times, an' you sure ain't him."

"You've met him, huh?"

"Yeah. Famous man, the judge. Fine character. A tribute to the Bench in this Wyomin' country. Eat hearty, men."

Sheriff Webster and the cook left.

Judge Bates' fingers trembled as he took knife and fork. "The dirty liar," he choked. "He's met Judge Bates, huh? Why, the—Well, he'll meet me soon enough, and he'll remember the meeting, too. Remember it for a long time!"

"Heh, heh," cackled Tobacco. "Heh heh."

The jurist studied his partner with ill-concealed rancor. "Laugh, you jackass, Sometimes I wonder why I don't take my jug and ram it down your big mouth. Must be my good nature that keeps me letting you hang around." Humor returned to him. "Or maybe it's my weak brain."

"Hades, your brain is one-hundred percent, Bates. You just told us that, don't you remember?"

The judge had a hasty retort formed, then pulled it back. He had been through this routine too many times before, he reflected with a tinge of bitterness. He fell to eating the fine food that Mabel had cooked for them. And as the food went down, his good nature returned. Fine cook, Mabel, or had the cafe cook prepared the meal? He put the question to Muskrat Pelton.

"Nope, Mabel has cooked it. She won't let nobody else ever cook for me unless it's my own batchin'. She's a fine girl, Bates."

"You're lucky, Muskrat, to have such a daughter to comfort your old age. Look at me, my friend? A single man without child, and having only Tobacco to care for. And then wondering why I take such care of him."

Tobacco smiled over his pie. "Yeah, you take good care of me, sure! Then why, my friend, am I in jail?"

Limpy Rhodes choked on his coffee all over Muskrat Pelton, who cursed him soundly. Sheriff Ed Webster stuck his head out his door. "Not so much racket in there," he warned.

"To hell with you," said Limpy clearly.

"Who said that?"

Tobacco spoke. "All four of us. You wanta make an issue outa it?"

WEBSTER STOOD undecided, then went back into his office. Judge Bates said. "You grab Limpy by the throat, Muskrat. Start choking him. You fight him off, Limpy. Get Webster in here and get him against the bars. I'll do the rest."

"Choke Limpy?"

"You heard me."

Muskrat smiled. "With pleasure."

Limpy backed away. "Why not let me choke him, Bates?"

"Go ahead, choke each other."

"Come on," growled Limpy. "Choke an' see how far you get, Muskrat! Me I've always cottoned to test backs with you, you ol' fossil!"

The two old timer set to, with dishes sliding on the concrete floor. Plates broke and cups skidded and they wrestled, screaming and hitting. The din was loud and Webser broke out of his office, running into the bull-pen.

"What's the matter here?"

"They got fighting over a piece of pie!" Judge Bates had to holler to make himself heard. "They'll kill each other!"

Tobacco wore a puzzled frown. The two old timers weren't acting, now; they were really slugging it out. Each remembered old grievances and each was out for revenge. He looked at Judge Bates, and scowled.

And the jurist, also, wore a frown. For one thing, the old timers might hurt each other; for another, they were so busy fighting, they might forget their plan. For the core of it revolved around getting Webster with his back to the bars, so Judge Bates and Tobacco, reaching through the bars, could throttle him.

Sheriff Webster hurriedly unlocked the door, behind him. He jumped on Limpy and pulled him out of the melee, with Muskrat Pelton following them, hitting and hollering. The sheriff backed up wih his back against the wall.

Limpy Rhodes tore loose, leaving part of his shirt in Sheriff Webster's clutch. He jumped on Muskrat again. Webster was hollering as loud as the two old timers. He threw the shirt to one side and jumped on Muskrat. He pulled the old trapper back, with Limpy following. This time Webster backed up against the cell door.

T o b a c c o gulped. Judge Bates cursed softly. Now Limpy stood with wide legs, breath wheezing, trying to catch his wind. Judge Bates caught his eye. Suddenly Limpy forgot his anger.

He rushed on Muskrat. He pulled the trapper around, and now Webster, trying to shield Muskrat Pelton, had his back to the bars in front of the Judge and Tobacco. The postmaster knelt, grabbed Webster's legs, pinned them to the bars. And Judge Bates' huge forearm, reaching through the bars even with Webster's neck doubled back and held the sheriff's head hard against the bars.

"G u r g l e—u m—g o o—" growled Webster.

Judge Bates pulled harder and shut off the man's words. "Hit him, you damned old rooster," he growled to Muskrat Pelton.

Muskrat and Limpy stopped fighting. Muskrat hit, his skinny knuckles smashing on Webster's jaw. Judge Bates heard Webster's head smack against the bars. The man's head sagged ahead. And just then, Limpy Rhodes put in his two-bits worth. His skinny fist made an arc that landed on Webster's jaw.

Webster's head again jerked back, again smacked the bars. Judge Bates let the man drop. Limpy Rhodes glared at Muskrat Pelton, fists doubled.

"You still want some more tusslin', Muskrat?"

He stood close to the bars. Tobacco Jones put his foot against the cocky rooster and kicked him against the far wall. "Forgit it," the postmaster snarled. "Get his keys, Muskrat."

The trapper got Webster's keys, opened his own cell, then opened that of Judge Bates and Tobacco. A moment later the four of them stood in the bull-pen. Limpy rubbed blood from his nose.

"We sure dug into each other, Muskrat."

"Can that talk, both of you!" Judge Bates' voice was harsh. "You're two old idiots, that's what you are!"

Muskrat's long face held a sudden sorrow."Now we are criminals, Bates. We've done busted the county jail. We'll go to Rawlins pen for this."

"I'll take care of that angle," Judge Bates snapped. "You never heard of

a judge going to jail, have you?"

"But I'm not a judge—"

"Shut up!" ordered Tobacco.

Judge Bates looked at his partner. "Thanks, pal." They went into the office. His jug was on the sheriff's desk. The jurist shook it and said, "He's drunk a lot of it, the swine," and uncorked it and drank aloud and long. Muskrat took a drink and so did Limpy, who handed the jug to Tobacco. But the postmaster did not take it. He backed off.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Limpy, surprised.

"He never drinks it," said the judge hurriedly. He got the jug and corked it. Outside came the sounds of footsteps.

"Somebody comin'," grumbled Tobacco.

"Get against the wall," ordered Judge Bates.

TOBACCO AND THE two trappers flattened against the wall with Judge Bates on the other side of the door, jug upraised. The door flew open and a tall, gangly man entered.

The office was dark. The man did not see them, for his eyes were not accustomed to the gloom. And the darkness made his face indistinguishable to Judge Lemanuel Bates. Probably one of Sheriff Webster's cronies, he figured. Maybe he had heard the ruckus and was coming to side his pal.

The judge's jug came down. The crockery whammed on the back of the man's head, knocking him forward where he lay on his belly, face down. "Good work," allowed Limpy. "Now let's see who the son is huh?" He rolled the limp man over and thumbed a match to bright life.

A gaunt, homely face, marked by a huge Roman nose and thin, cold lips, looked up at them, the match's flare glaring from his open, unseeing eyes. The light went out and Judge Bates heard Limpy and Muskrat gasp.

"Who is he?" snapped Tobacco.

Judge Bates answered. "Judge Emil Simpson!"

5

MILT JEFFERSON was playing a sociable game of rummy with two cronies in the lobby of the Town House when Frenchy LaFevre came in. "See where them four gents got outa the calaboose," he told his boss.

Jefferson frowned. He didn't care to have his hirelings butt into his card-playing. "What four gents?"

"Well, Limpy an' Muskrat. Yeah, an' that fat gun an' that skinny guy."

Milt Jefferson laid down his cards hurriedly. "Out of jail! What are you talkin' about, Frenchy?"

LaFevre told him about seeing Limpy and Muskrat snowshoe out of Willow Brook, heading back into the hills. "Yeah, an' that fat gink an' that slim fellow are in the cage right now, drinkin' coffee."

"Your play, Milt," a player said.

Jefferson paid him no attention. "How'd they get out, Frenchy? Did Judge Simpson release them?"

Frenchy LaFevre shrugged his mackinaw-clad shoulders. "I dunno, boss. Judge Simpson went down that way about five minutes ago, I guess. They's a rumor aroun' that the fat guy is Judge Bates. But I don't believe that, do you?"

"Your play, Milt."

"To hell with the game." Milt Jefferson was pulling on his coat. "Maybe that fellow is Judge Bates, at that. But what would he be doing in this country? Where's Sheriff Webster?"

"Down at the jail, I figure. He got some chuck for his prisoners, an' never brought the plates back to the cafe."

They hurried outside, Milt Jefferson in the lead. It was snowing a little, the flakes drifting straight down, for there was no wind. When they went past Mabel Pelton's cafe, Jefferson saw Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones at the counter, drinking coffee and talking to Mabel. And Milt Jefferson's scowl grew.

The jail was dark. Jefferson did not knock. He pushed the door in and went inside, knowing now that

something had gone haywire. He stumbled and fell down and Frenchy LaFevre fell on him.

Jefferson cursed him. "Get to your feet yoiu awkward boob!"

"That's a man layin' there, Jefferson!"

Milt Jefferson found the kerosene lamp and struck a match. "That's Judge Simpson, ain't it?" demanded Frenchy LaFevre.

Jefferson burnt his fingers. "Ouch!" He got the lamp going and adjusted the wick. "Get some water, Frenchy!"

"They ain't none. The town pump's froze up."

"Then get some snow."

Frenchy ran outside, carrying the wash basin. Milt Jefferson carried the lamp through the bull-pen and stooped and looked at Sheriff Ed Webster, who lay in a sleeping position, there against the bars.

Frenchy came back into the office. "Where are you, boss?'

"In here."

The squat man held the basin full of clean snow and looked down at Sheriff Webster, who snored a little. "Somebody's lambasted him an' knocked him cold," he finally said. "Wonder what they hit him with?"

"What difference does it make?" Milt Jefferson knelt beside the sheriff. "His jail keys are gone. No wonder them four sons are out of the clink."

"The keys are on his desk, boss."

Jefferson got to his feet, eyes serious in the dim light. Frenchy LaFevre watched him. Jefferson didn't like the thick man's gaze. Sometimes he figured that LaFevre wasn't as ignorant as he put on. Sometimes he got the impression LaFevre was smart enough and just acted dumb.

Frenchy Lafevere started wiping Webster's low forehead with snow.

"Don't waste snow on that gink," rapped Milt Jefferson. "Put some on Judge Simpson. Webster ain't go no brains!"

THEY WENT back to the office, Frenchy LaFevre still carrying his pan of snow. They got Judge Simpson sitting up with his back toward the wall and Frenchy rubbed snow on the jurist's forehead. Finally Simpson emitted a big groan and opened his eyes. He blinked.

"Oh, my head. Mother get me some headache powders, please!"

Jefferson found himself smiling. "You're not at home, Judge. What happened?"

"Where am I, then?"

"At the sheriff's office."

Sanity came to Judge Simpson's pale eyes. "Oh, yes, I remember." He found his feet, his knees shaky; he sat down in the chair. "I was coming in the door and something hit me. Oh, how my head aches! Wonder what fell on me?"

"Fell on you, hell!" Frenchy LaFevre spoke loudly. "They slugged you, them four gents did. Then they busted jail!"

"And two of them are down at the cafe, right now." Milt Jefferson was thoughtful. "For all the unmitigated gall! Slug the judge and the sheriff an' then go order a cup of coffee."

"Was one of them Judge Lemanuel Bates?" asked Simpson.

Jefferson opened his mouth to answer and then Sheriff Webster lurched out of the bull-pen, shirt torn, hair rumpled, and face skinned up. "Which way did they go?" he growled. "I'll get a posse an' run em' down an' hang the last mother's son of them! I'll—"

"You'll sit down," ordered Judge Simpson.

"But, judge—they've made their escape!"

"Sit down!"

Webster sat, head in hands. Judge Simpson spoke slowly. "I'll go down to the cafe, men, and see if that really is Judge Lemanuel Bates. Webster, you said you'd met Judge Bates, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I know him well. But that weren't him, Judge."

Jefferson growled, "A friend to Limpy Rhodes an' Muskrat Pelton is an enemy of mine! These hellions has busted our county' jail. They've slugged our sheriff an' our judge. They've busted the peace when they picked a fight with Frenchy here. Me, I say we got enough charges

against all four of them dang near run their sentences into a life stretch."

"Enough of that talk, sir!" rapped Judge Simpson. "Your fight, sir, is not the fight of the law. Your fight, Mr. Jefferson, is not my affair. My job is to interpret the law and enforce it in case I see fit, with impartiality and fairness. I cannot subscribe to your talk, sir."

"Then cancel your subscription," said Milt Jefferson. "When I get more powerful, I'm gettin' you off the bench, Simpson!"

"Try an' be damned!"

Webster looked up. His face looked like a herd of wildcats had used it for a battleground. "Let's mosey down to the cafe, judge, an' pick up these two wild men, huh? Wonder where Limpy an' Muskrat is?"

"They aren't around," said LaFevre.

Jefferson spoke. "We're goin' along."

The four went to Mabel Pelton's cafe. The night was turning bitterly cold. Icy air rushed through the door with them to die as it hit the pot- bellied heater. Tobacco Jones and Judge Lemanuel Bates were the only cuttomers in the restaurant. Judge Bates looked up scowling.

"Shut the door," he said; "it's cold."

Judge Simpson rushed across the room, hand extended. "Why, my estimable colleague, Judge Lemanuel Bates of the Cowtail court. Only yesterday I was reading a brief of your famous verdict in the Miller vs. Thomas case. What brings you to our fair city, sir?"

Judge Bates shook Simpson's hand. "Don't recollect remembering you, sir."

"Why, I'm Judge Simpson. Judge Emil Simpson."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes....Judge Simpson. It has been years, sir, since last I saw you. You look fine, sir." The jurist put on a convincing act.

JUDGE BATES glanced at Webster and Jefferson and LaFevre, who stood and watched them. Jefferson's face was glum and LaFevre chewed on tobacco. Webster, though, showed surprise. "We gotta arrest you men," the sheriff stated.

Judge Bates' brows rose. "And why, sir?"

"You busted jail. Slugged me an' the judge here an' busted the county calaboos. A criminal offense, as you know."

"But we didn't slug you."

"No, *you* didn't. But Limpy Rhodes an' Muskrat Pelton both hit me." The lawman cradled his jaw in his dirty hand. "My jawbone feels like a mule's lambasted me."

Judge Bates looked from one to the other. "We don't understand this charge, gentlemen."

"Don't lie to us," growled Jefferson.

Judge Simpson whirled on him. "Jefferson, I demand you keep a civil tongue in your head. My friend here, Judge Bates, is not a liar. He is one of the great legal minds of Wyoming, sir."

Jefferson nodded. "Maybe he is, but I still claim he's a liar."

Judge Bates got off his stool and waddled toward the sheepman. "Sir, you'll eat those words. I'll ram my fist—"

Judge Simpson and Tobacco Jones and Sheriff Webster hurriedly grabbed the irate jurist.

"No fighting, please," Judge Simpson pleaded.

Jefferson stood with wide legs, fists up. They made Judge Bates step back. "We will settle this some other time," the jurist promised. He spoke directly to Judge Simpson. "Sheriff Webster unlocked our cells, Judge Simpson, and told us charges were dismissed against us. We walked out openly, sir. I cannot understand what happened to you and Webster —for I cannot imagine who would slug you."

Sheriff Webster choked. "Bates, you know Limpy an' Muskrat slugged me. You mean to stand here an' tell such a bald lie?"

Judge Bates sighed. "I cannot understand your charge, Sheriff Webster. Do you figure us unbalanced fools, sir? Do you think that

if we slugged you—as you claim—we would calmly sit here. We would be in hiding, would we not?"

"Where's Limpy an' Muskrat?"

"They have gone to their cabins." Judge Bates let his voice rise in his best oratorical manner. "Sir, you call me a fabricator! But, sir, I can call you a fork-tongued liar, also. You stated to me, in front of witnesses, that I was not Judge Lemanuel Bates. You claimed you knew the judge very well and I was not him. You were lying, sheriff."

Webster mumbled, "Mistaken identity, nothin' more."

"More than that, sir. A lie to bolster your blown up ego, it was. Apologize to me for that statement, sir, or I shall sue you in the courts for slander."

"I apologize."

Judge Bates spoke to the sheepman. "Sir, why do you hate Tobacco and myself? What have we ever done to incur your antipathy? You never saw either of us until today. I can't understand your attitude."

Jefferson was silent.

Judge Bates continued. "We were turned out of jail by the sheriff, who seems to have lost his memory. We understood that my note to Judge Simpson had freed all of us. We have done nothing wrong. I intend, if you push this case, to sue this county, and you officials—and you too, Jefferson and LaFevre—for false arrest, for slander, for illegal imprisonment, for assault and battery, and for violation of our rights as citizens of the United States of America. Have you a witness to the claim that Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton slugged you, Sheriff Webster?"

"No, I ain't."

"And you, Judge Simpson. Have you a witness that says we slugged you? And why, sir, would we slug you? I had appealed to you for your legal aid, sir."

Judge Simpson glared at Sheriff Webster. "Judge Bates, I firmly believe this nitwit did it."

Webster stared at the skinny jurist. "Me, slug you? And why would I do that, Judge Simpson?"

"I see it in this light, sheriff. You figured some of your assailants, whoever they were, might be coming back. So you hit me from behind, not being able to identity me in the dim light."

"Judge, I—" Webster made a gesture of despair. "Judge, I look upon you as a—a father. I—I—"

Jefferson growled. "Well, I file charges against these men, Judge Simpson. I demand you bring them into jail until you call their preliminary trials. I demand that as a taxpayer and citizen."

"I will hold court at eight in the morning."

"Then they have to stay in the jail over night!"

JUDGE SIMPSON was caught between a legal technicality and his desire to be Judge Bates' friend. He was a stickler for the finer points of law, yet he recognized Judge Bates' power. The judge was a very good friend of the governor. Maybe Judge Bates could and would bring this to court. Maybe, with the power Judge Bates had, he could get the governor to cancel Judge Simpson's election, and appoint a new man to take the bench here in Willow Brook.

And Judge Simpson had a nice, easy job with a big salary. Suddenly his keen mind found an out.

"I hereby institute, here in this cafe, a court of the country of Willow Brook, town of Willow Brook, Wyoming. And, as superior judge of that court, I have listened to evidence on either side, and will advise the combatting parties to do one of two things."

"That legal?" Milt Jefferson spoke to Judge Bates. Judge Bates nodded. Jefferson spoke to Judge Simpson. "All right, what are the two choices?"

Judge Simpson spoke in a deep, judicial tone. Judge Bates almost had to smile at the man's assumed importance. He would advise Milt Jefferson to drop all charges against Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones. Webster had no witnesses that Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton had slugged him.

"And in court, Mr. Jefferson, the words of witness count, not hearsay.

Four against one, sir, would be the evidence. And if Judge Bates, in turn, sues you and me and the county—"

"An me, too," stated Sheriff Webster. "I say drop all charges."

Judge Simpson beamed. "And your verdict, Mr. Jefferson?"

Jefferson's lips sported a twisted grin. "What other choice is there for me?" He and Frenchy LaFevre walked out.

Sheriff Webster shook hands with Tobacco and Judge Bates. "Sorry this mistaken identity occured, Judge. Good night, sir."

He followed Jefferson and LaFevre into the storm.

Judge Bates uncorked his jug. "Have a drink, Judge Simpson?"

"With pleasure, sir." The jurist drank deeply. "Fine liquor. I looked upon your note, Judge, as the gesture of a prankster, for this town has a few of those, too. Then, someobdy told me the heavyset man carried a jug, and I knew then that rumor was right—you were indeed Judge Lemanuel Bates. So I hied myself to the jail and when I came in the door—My head aches. If you will excuse me now?"

The jurist left, hand to his forehead.

There was a silence in the restuarant. Mabel, who had heard the whole conversation, winked at Judge Bates, who solemnly winked back. Tobacco nursed his coffee and suddenly grinned.

"You sure know the legal angles, judge. An' you sure can tell some big lies. By blazes, you can lie."

"Not lies, sir. Fabrications."

Mable spoke. "Get out of here, you two old bums. I got to close up. Now get out, quick."

"Don't be in such a rush," growled Tobacco Jones.

6

MILT JEFFERSON and Frenchy LaFevre went to the livery-barn where they saddled their broncs, working in the dim light of the lantern hung from the beam overhead. Their cayuses saddled, they led them out of the barn, closing the door behind them.

LaFevre said, "There goes Bates an' Jones, boss."

Jefferson had one overshoe in stirrup. He let his foot fall and he watched Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones go into the Town House, the judge's jug reflecting lamplight from its polished surface as the door opened.

"That Judge Bates, he's smart, Milt."

"Too damn' smart." Jefferson rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I wonder what those two scissorbills are doin' on this range?"

Frenchy LaFevre shrugged. Finally he asked, "What do you mean by that, Milt? I don't quite follow you."

"Forgit it."

Jefferson went up, filling his saddle. "You take your bronc back an' unstrip him, Frenchy. Stay in town tonight. Keep an eye on those two ol' pelicans an' come out to the ranch come mornin', huh?"

"You're the boss."

LaFevre led his bronc back into the stable. Jefferson rapped his heels against his cayuse's ribs and loped into the wind that already was gathering snow and making it swirl into drifts. He pulled his head down so his sheepskin collar would protect him from the biting wind.

Many thoughts swirled in the big sheepman. Chief of these was concerned with the coming of Tobacco Jones and Judge Lemanuel Bates into Willow Brook. This was not a pleasure trip for the pair, a vacation. Nobody but an idiot would consider this trip a vacation, riding through icy wind and pounding granules of snow. The pair was on this range for some definite purpose, he was sure of that.

Were they here to investigate the federal statement that beaver were being illegally trapped on Willow Brook? Judge Bates, as a federal judge, would know about the poaching. For a circular had been sent to the jurist; Milt Jefferson was sure of that. One had been sent to Judge Simpson...but the judge had never

read it.

Sheriff Ed Webster had been in the jurist's office when the mail had been brought to the court-house by the jailer, who was now sick abed with pneumonia. Judge Simpson had not yet come into his office. So the lawman had gone through the judge's mail and picked out the letter telling of the beaver poaching. He had ridden out to Milt Jefferson's ranch with the letter.

"Be gad, Milt they're onto them beavers comin' into St. Louis. An' be gad, they suspect that ol' scissorbill Muskrat Pelton of shippin' them in."

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Here, read this."

Jefferson had read it slowly, then reread it. He folded it and put it into his pocket. "Sure lucky we got this before that long-drink Judge Simpson read it. Well, they're suspicious of them furs, huh? An' they blame them on Muskrat? That's good, that's fine. Next batch we'll ship into Chicago, huh?"

Webster had nodded.

"Things are playin' our way." Jefferson had paced the big room of his ranch-house. "We'll clean up a small fortune here. The cricks are full of beaver that's been protected for years. And will continue to make it look like Muskrat Pelton is shippin' them into market."

"I don't like it," grumbled Webster. "I'd feel a lot safer if them federal men didn't suspect anybody on this range. I sure would." He tapped a long dirty finger on the table. "They're sendin' out a detective, this says."

"I noticed that."

"Well, what're we goin' do?"

Jefferson's voice had become suddenly harsh. "Don't belly down on me, Webster. Don't get cold feet. How much does the county pay you each month?"

"One hundred an' twenty. Why?"

"How much do I pay you?"

"Five hundred. Why?" The lawman made an impatient gesture. "Ah, don't worry, Milt. Me an' you is in this too deep for me to pull out. I won't, fella, I won't. My sick girl needs this money, Lord help her. When I think of her alone in Cincinnati—alone in that hospital—"

"Buck up, friend."

SHERIFF WEBSTER sat silent, morose. Jefferson could see he was deeply affected. He had lost his wife in child-birth and he had some daughter, who had contracted some bone malady. Hospitals and doctor bills had broken Webster financially. Once he had owned a good-sized cow-outift. That had disappeared and the county had elected him sheriff.

Milt Jefferson had needed him. Slowly he had acquired Sheriff Websters friendship. At heart, the lawman was honest; but he had been desperate for money. Finally Jefferson after three months, had loaned him mony. More loans followed. He had Webster where he wanted him, then.

Now he studied the lawman, wondering if he would break. If he did—Last year they had gotten almost a thousand beaver pelts. This year the take would not run to those proportions but with the high prices for hides the total sum of money would reach about that of last year's.

For beaver, having been protected for some years, were thick here. They were big, too, and with the cold winters, they had prime belts. Jefferson had needed Webster on his side, not so much as a sheriff but as a man to watch the mail coming into the court-house, for either Webster or his jailer delivered it to the court-house.

He wondered how the federal men had found out beaver were leaving this range. He figured he had had an airtight set-up in St. Louis, one that would never leak information to federal men. But he realized that, with a sudden influx of beaver pelts on the market, federal agents would get suspicious eventually.

And how had suspicion centered on Muskrat Pelton? Jefferson did not know that, either. There were quite a few angles here he did not understand. But still, riding through the storm, he kept remembering Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones.

At first, he had tried to make

friends with Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes, but that had been impossible. Both oldsters were ringy and sore at him for starting a fur company in competition with them. Fur company... That made Milt Jefferson smile. Some fur company Limpy and Muskrat had...

Their company had two other trappers beside themselves, oldtimers that no other trapping concern would hire, oldtimers that were as ornery and ringy as their two bosses. They too were honest. They caught the pelts that the law allowed; they did not touch beaver pelts.

Jefferson had strung out a half-dozen or so trappers who were merely a blind to show the public he had men trapping for him. They caught the ordinary run of fur—a few marten, more fishers, some mink, muskrats and weasels. These men did not know that their boss trafficked in beaver pelts. They went out on the creeks, moved their supplies into cabins, and trapped on commission and salary. They seldom came to the home ranch on Mule Deer Creek.

Jefferson's sheep, too, were part of the blind. Though the ordinary individual would not deem it possible, there was a tie-up between the sheep and the illegal trapping. Milt Jefferson found himself thinking of Frenchy LaFevre.

LaFevre had come into Willow Brok one day, bumming a ride with the stage-driver. He had been unshaven, hungry and broke. He had hit Milt Jefferson up for the price of a drink, some grub, and a shave.

"Where you from, stranger?"

LaFevre had grinned. "Does it make any difference, fella? All I want is a buck or two. A man has to eat."

"Ever do any trappin?"

"A little bit. Up in Montany an' up in the Yukon, too." Dark eyes had studied him. "Why ask?""

"I need a trapper."

"Don't look at me. I don't want to trap."

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothin'!"

Milt Jefferson had been forced to smile. "You sound like I do. All right. get filled up an' spruced up, an' come back here to me. Maybe we can work out somethin', huh?"

"I don't want a job with any work connected with it, savvy."

That had been right after the beaver hides had become prime. So far, Milt Jefferson had only taken two men with him when the moon was right for beaver. That was a man known as Pelican, and the other was Sheriff Ed Webster.

Perhaps, sometime and somewhere, Pelican had had another name, but whatever that name had been, no man knew except Pelican. And he himself had perhaps forgotten it. He was a small man with a long neck, a neck seemingly too long for the size of his wiry body. He and Milt Jefferson had been together for almost ten years.

They had met in Juarez, in Old Mexico. There, across a fantan table, friendship had come to him. They had run stolen cattle in New Mexico territory; they had robbed gold-miners in the Montana diggings; they had robbed stages in the Black Hills. Crime had cemented their friendship solidly.

They worked together neatly.

Pelican had been the first to suspect Frenchy LaFevre. "I don't like him, Milt. I wonder about him. Maybe he's a federal man, sent out to work in with us."

"He's too ignorant," said Jefferson.

"Maybe he jus' pretends to be ignorant?"

Therefore they had agreed not to take Frenchy LaFevre with them on their expeditions. They always raided on a moonlit night, for on moonlight depended the success of their venture. And each of those nights found Frenchy LaFevre in Willow Brook town on some errand for Milt Jefferson.

FROM WHAT Jefferson had heard down in the Ace Down Saloon, both Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes had picked trouble with LaFevre—he had not wanted trouble with them. Jefferson decided he had done wrong by getting Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones jailed. He had incurred the emnity of the two

Cowtrail men. Then another thought hit him. What if the federal game-wardens had commissioned Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones to investigate the trapping of beaver in the Wilow Brook area? Sometimes, so he had heard, the two did investigate for the government.

"You're getting wild-eyed," he told himself.

He came to the ridge. Below him was the cabin of Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton. Milt Jefferson frowned and rubbed his mitten across his nose. He looked up at the sky and reckoned a moon would be up in a few days. So his almanac had told him. He took his thoughts back to the old trappers.

According to Judge Bates, Limpy and Muskrat had left Willow Brook town, going to their cabin. That meant that even now they should be down in that cabin asleep. There was plenty on this range that Milt Jefferson did not like. He decided to check to see if the broncs of the two old trappers were in the lean-to barn.

He left his saddle, tying his horse in the diamond willows. He went ahead on foot. There were only two sets of trappers in these parts; his men and those of Limpy Rhodes and Pelton. And if the two old men got wind that peltry—beaver peltry—was going out of Willow Brook— And if they heard they had been suspected of the illegal trapping—

They'd be out scouting him, Milt Jefferson, for they would know he was the only other trapper on these grounds. They would be watching him, trying to get some evidence against him.

If the cabin were empty, they would be out in the hills, for they were not in town. He was sure of that. But if they were asleep, like they should be—

He studied the barn through the willows. Now, carrying his rifle, he ran across the clearing with its snow marked by hoofs and moccasins and hobnail boots. He sidled along the wall and stuck his head in the door. He smelled the warm smell of horseflesh and heard jaws grinding on hay.

But maybe it wasn't horseflesh he smelled. The oldtimers had a milk cow; maybe he heard her jaws. He slid the door shut and lit a match. The flare showed two broncs in the stalls, unsaddled and eating hay, and the cow beyond them. The cow looked at him and licked her jaws.

Something whammed across Jefferson's skull. He fought to get to his knees to hold him but he went down with the dull knowledge that he had been slugged from behind. When he came to he was tied to his saddle.

He lifted his aching, throbbing head. His cayuse was walking down the trail packed by bobsled-runners and the shod hoofs of saddledbroncs and wagon-teams. The reins were looped around the horn to keep his bronc from stepping on them.

Dimly, he saw that the bronc was heading for home. Grayness was creeping across the snow and he realized that dawn was not many minutes away. He had been unconscious for some time. His rifle was in the saddle-scabbard.

A rope—his own catch—held him to leather. He pieced the thing together. Either Limpy Rhodes or Muskrat Pelton had pole-axed him there in the barn. Then they had dragged him to saddle and loaded him on his bronc, tied up the horse's reins, and pointed the beast toward the sheep-ranch.

He got his mittens off and untied the rope and coiled it and strapped it to the fork of his kak. One thing was certain: the two oldsters weren't to be caught napping. He decided he wouldn't tell Pelican or Frenchy LaFevre about them pole-axing him. They'd hooraw him to death.

His eyes were steady now, but his head was throbbing like wild horses running across rock. He had an idea now how Judge Emil Simpson and Sheriff Ed Webster had felt, after being beefed in the jail. His eyes focused on something square and white pinned to the front of his mackinaw.

He jerked the paper loose. On it

was scrawled, in loose, big handwriting:

Come snoopin' agin, Milt Jefferson, an' we'll give you a longer nap. Hope what you call your brain is poundin' a hole in your cast-iron skull.

The Two Sledgehammers.

He wadded it up and put it into his pocket.

AN HOUR LATER, his head a little clearer, he rode into his sheep ranch, where Pelican, who was eating breakfast in the house, came out to meet him in the barn. The small man scissored his neck around and said, "You look pale, Milt. Drink the wrong licker down in town?"

"Yeah, bad liquor."

The sheepman was pulling the latigo strap loose. Outside, in the pen alongside the barn, dogs were growling.

"Feed the dogs yet, Pelican?"

"Hell, jus' climbed outa my sougans, Milt. Ain't had time yet to chuck them curs."

Jefferson said, "You unsaddle, and I'll feed them." While Pelican stripped the kak loose Jefferson got some ground wheat from the bin and poured some water on it, taking the water from the trough at the end of the barn. He had to break on the trough to get to the water.

Two skinned jackrabbits were in a box, frozen stiff. Jefferson took the old meat-cleaver, hanging on a hook, and cut the rabbits into small parts. Then he went through a side-door, carrying the gruel and the meat.

Many dogs were in the room. The light from the lantern hanging on the wall showed them to be short, low-coupled animals. They were solid and heavy, all muscles, and they had wide chests and exceptionally short legs. They growled and fought over the food.

Pelican came in. "They need work," he said.

"Soon, when the moon comes right."

"About two days, huh?"

Jefferson was watching the dogs. "About that, Pelican. Yeah, they need work. But it won't be workin' sheep."

"Where's LaFevre?"

"He stayed in town." They went into the barn with Jefferson carefully locking the door that led to the dogs. "He'll be out come forenoon." They walked toward the house, Jefferson short and dark, with his thick head sitting almost on this shoulders without hardly any neck, and with Pelican with his long, ungainly neck sticking far out of the collar of his sheepskin.

"What's in the wind, Milt?"

"Plenty, Pelican." They went into the house. Here it was warm, the air good; Jefferson took off his coat. When he put his mittens in his coat-pocket he felt the note left by Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes. "Listen close, Pelican, and listen damn' hard, too!"

7

LIMPY RHODES awoke with a start and sat up. Muskrat Pelton was pounding on the wall, almost bent with laughter. Limpy looked at him, the lamplight showing his puzzled frown.

"What t'hades is wrong with you?"

"You should see him, Limpy! When I socked him with that blackjack made of sand he just went down plumb fast like somebody'd roped his legs an' tripped him!"

"Who went down? An' where?"

"Milt Jefferson! In the barn!"

Limpy slid out of bed, his red long-handled underwear dirty under the dim lamplight. He pulled on his pants and overshoes and ran outside, following Muskrat Pelton. "The man's gone loco," he told himself with chattering teeth. "He's took one drink too many. Gawd, he's nuts!"

Then he stared down on the unconscious form of Milt Jefferson.

"What happened, Muskrat?"

Muskrat told him. "Then I slugged him! Good luck I thought of havin' one of us up on guard tonight."

"You thought of it? Hades, I figured that out." Limpy forgot to chat-

ter and smiled instead. "Write a note an' we'll pin it to the big son an' get him on his cayuse—the hoss must be around close."

They spent the rest of the night giggling like a couple of schoolgirls. They'd started Jefferson's bronc down the trail, reins tied up, and then gone back to the house to a pot of boiling coffee which they spiked often and freely with whiskey from the jug in the corner.

"An' he stood there, lookin' at the cow, savvy? So I come up behin' an' wham—down came the blackjack—Heh, heh, heh! You should've seen the cow's face when he toppled! You should've seen her expression change."

"That's carryin' it too far, Muskrat. Cows don't have no expressions on their faces. Stick to the truth."

"Can you prove a cow doesn't have expressions on her face? Can you prove it, windbag?"

"Don't call me a wind-bag, you blown-up hunk of pemmican."

"I'm callin' you jes' that, fella."

Muskrat Pelton had his fists raised. "You wanta rough it up a little, huh? You ain't never got enough yet, huh? You wanted to fight down in that cell when we beefed Sher'ff Webster. We never got to finish that fight."

"You got a daughter, Muskrat. I won't hit you. I'll remember her."

"She's old enough to take care of herself."

Limpy Rhodes smiled suddenly. "Hell's blazes, but we're gittin' tetchy, pard. Yeah, I'll admit I lost my perspective, back yonder in that cell. I'm apoligizin'. Do you accept my apologies?"

Muskrat spoke slowly. "All right, but be keerful with your tongue after this. If'n you ain't, I'm cuttin' it out."

"You ain't man enough!" Limpy Rhodes caught himself in time. "There I go, sayin' mean things to you again." He poured out some more coffee. "Have another cup, partner?"

Muskrat Pelton spiked the coffee. "What t'hades is Bates an' Jones doin' on this range, Limpy? How come they ride all the distance up from Cowtrail through the snow an' cold?"

"To see you, of course."

Muskrat shook his long head sadly. "That ain't the reason, I figure. Them two men are lazy, pal. The judge has got a nice home down there an' there's a nice pot-bellied heater in his office. Tobacco Jones has a nice hot stove in his postoffice, too. Nope, they's somethin' else houndin' 'em, I'd say."

"What would it be?"

"I dunno."

Limpy poured some more whiskey into his coffee. "Well, I'm glad they come. If'n they hadn't, me an' you'd been in that calaboose for life. We'd've had a life-time lease on that cell."

"Wonder how they come out, down in town. Me, I didn't feel right, leavin' 'em to face the violin, but they made us hit out here for our camp."

"Maybe they come out on a fishin' trip. You done tol' me more'n once how them two cottoned to fishin' trout."

"But the streams are froze up. An' besides, there's jus' as good a-fishin' aroun' Cowtrail."

"Maybe the law run 'em out— No, that couldn't be true, 'cause Judge Bates is the law. He's right handy with that jug, ain't he? Bet ol' Judge Simpson sure has got a sick headache about now. An' Sheriff Webster's head sorta smacked them bars hard when I socked him."

"Not as hard as when I laid one on him."

"Okay, you hit him the hardest." Limpy Rhodes and his whiskey were growing big-hearted. "You kin have the honor of hittin' him the hardest." He cackled like a hen who'd laid a double-yoke egg. "All three of them got headaches now, Muskrat. Simpson, Webster, an' Milt Jefferson."

"Wish that trap-robber Frenchy LaFevre had a big headache, too. But do you suspect they's anythin' between his horns that's soft enough to carry any pain? I doubt it. Bet his cranium is filled with rock."

"HIT YOUR coffee again?" Limpy Rhodes poured half of the whiskey on the table cloth

when he missed Muskrat's cup. "Never mind, never mind; Judge Bates has a jug of whiskey. We kin afford to waste some. We got reinforcements, like General Grant said after he'd put the run on Stonewall Jackson at Gettysburg."

"Grant wasn't at Gettysburg."

Limpy eyed him steadily. "Were you there?"

"No, I wasn't."

"Well, I was. Me an' Grant stood side by side."

"You're loco. I've read otherwise."

"You mean I wasn't standin' longside of General Grant? You mean to imply that I'm a bald-faced—"

"Bald-headed, you mean. No, I've read where Grant wasn't at Gettysburg."

"But I seed him with my own eyes. Are you takin' the word of my eyes, or of some hightoned gent's what's writ a book? Which are you takin'?"

"I'll take the gent with the book. Your eyes are no good to me. You demonstrated that when you fell in love last winter with that widder in the roomin' house down in town."

"What'd you mean? You're jes' jealous 'cause she smiled at me, not you. I knowed you was gettin' hurt all the time. Now it's jus' comin' out, huh? Well, what was wrong with the widder?"

"She was a big as a barn an' homely as a half-sick skunk. Yit you sat up one whole night, keepin' me from sleepin', tellin' me how purty she was. How slim she was, an' the color of of her lovely eyes!"

"I was drunk, pard."

There was a silence. Dawn was creeping into the cabin. "We oughta turn out that lamp," said Limpy shakily. "We ain't got enough money to afford wastin' coal-oil." He looked owlishly at the slickering flame. He blinked his eyes twice and his head sank on his chest. He started to snore.

Soon Muskrat Pelton was snoring too. The lamp kept on flickering, the chimney getting blacker and blacker. The daylight kept getting stronger and stronger, coming through the frosted windows and lighting the cabin with a gray light. The fire sank down in the heater and a chill crept into the room.

Somewhere, Muskrat Pelton heard a crash. His head jerked up and he came awake. His chair slid out from under him and he landed on the floor, sitting down. He was grabbing under his coat for his gun but the weapon caught in his sheepskin. A hard hand came down and held his wrist.

"Go easy on that gun, old man."

Muskrat Pelton looked up into Tobacco Jones' chewing jaws. A small grin crept across his whiskery face. "Howdy, Tobacco. How come I land sittin' down on the floor?"

"Your chair busted."

"Busted, hell! You pulled it out from under me! Where's Limpy?"

"Over there."

"I cain't see him. All I kin see is Judge Bates standin' t'other side of the table."

"Get to your feet."

MUSKRAT got shakily to his feet. "Never had much sleep last night an' it's showin' on me." Limpy Rhodes was sitting on the floor. Judge Bates had pulled his chair out, too. "Git up, Limpy, we got guests."

"The guests got us, you mean."

"What time is it?" asked Muskrat.

Judge Bates told them is was around ten o'clock. Tobacco Jones had a fire going in the cookstove and was looking in the cupboard for plates and some grub. The jurist was stoking a fire in the heater, jabbing at the coals with a poker before shoveling in some Wyoming lignite coal.

He had left his jug on the table.

"Mind what happened to us last night?" asked Limpy.

The judge did not look from his work. "You got drunk, for one thing. You got out of the calaboose, for another."

"Muskrat done slugged Milt Jefferson."

Judge Bates turned, still holding the poker. Tobacco Jones had been breaking an egg into the skillet.

"Dang it, I got some shell in with the aig." He poked with his finger

into the pan. "Min' repeatin' that, Limpy?"

Muskrat leaned back, an innocent air about his homely person, while his partner told about Milt Jefferson. "So we loaded him on his hoss put his rifle into the boot, an' turned the hoss toward home."

"I come up behin' him," said Muskrat.

Judge Bates chuckled and returned to his work. Tobacco broke another egg and never got any shell in that one. Limpy slowly uncorked Judge Bates' jug, slid it across the table, got it hidden from the judge. Then he carefully poured their pint bottle full of whiskey from the jug.

When the bottle was full to the cork, he corked it and placed it in his hip pocket. Then he put the jug back on the table and put the cork into it The jurist still worked at the heater and Tobacco still cracked eggs.

Muskrat Pelton winked at him.

Limpy asked, "How about a drink, Bates?"

"What'd you think I left that jug on the table for? Just to look at? Sure, hit it, men."

Limpy poured two tin cups half-full of brown whiskey. The jurist glared at him. "I can stand any form of ignorance, sir, except ignorance about whiskey." He slammed the stove-door shut.

Limpy was surprised. "What'd you mean, Bates?"

"Whiskey should never go into tin, sir. The tin puts a harsh taste in the whiskey. Whiskey should always be stored in glass or in wood."

"This won't be in tin very long."

Limpy drank the whole thing, throat bobbing.

"He's a drunkard," stated Muskrat. He looked at Judge Bates. "Say, how come you two ride into Willow Brook? Long, cold ride over from Cowtrail, too."

"We come to see you," said Tobacco Jones.

Muskrat frowned. "That don't seem logical. Nobody'd ride through cold just to lay eyes on my sin-warped carcass. Sure they ain't some other motive behin' this visit, friends?"

"You joke with yourself." Judge Bates smiled. "What other motive would there be, Muskrat? Of course, you've got a pretty daughter, but Tobacco and I are old enough to be her father."

"Then why did you come?" Muskrat was determined.

"We came to visit with you. We came to get in some fishing." Judge Bates held up his hand for silence "Sure, you'll say. 'There's streams around Cowtrail.' But the fact is, all those streams are frozen over."

"Cold winter, huh?"

"Terrible winter."

"That satisfy you?" asked Tobacco.

Muskrat grinned and rubbed his whiskers. "Reckon it does, men. How about that chuck, Tobacco? 'Bout ready?"

"Take another snort," encouraged the judge.

They had breakfast and more whiskey was consumed by Limpy and Muskrat. When Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones left at noon the two old partners were in their bunks snoring. They hadn't undressed. Judge Bates and Tobacco rolled them around and got them under the dirty blankets.

"Look out Milt Jefferson don't set your cabin on fire," joked the judge.

"Let it burn," mumbled Muskrat.

8

THE LOW SUN WAS bright on the clean snow. It reflected back into a man's eyes with a glaring harshness that Judge Bates did not like. The partners rode north, heading for Mule Deer Creek.

"Where we headin' for, Bates?"

"For Milt Jefferson s outfit."

Tobacco studied his partner. "We'll sure be welcome there. About like twin skunks with hydreephobia."

Judge Bates nodded.

"Why do we go there?"

"I'd like to look the outfit over Heck, I figure Limpy Rhodes and old Muskrat aren't shipping these beaver pelts out. They're two old drunks, that's all. Muskrat hasn't changed a

bit in the last fifty years. What do you say?"

"Jefferson's doin' it."

"That's why I want to look into his spread. That depot agent down in Willow Brook told me that Jefferson's got a friend named Pelican."

"Male, or female."

Judge Bates studied his companion "Humor doesn't fit into the situation," he stated. "Male, of course. I'd like to see this pelican fellow and see what kind of a high-flyer he is."

"Pelicans can fly high."

They rode on in silence. Once Tobacco's mule stumbled. He jerked him up and put him back on the trail. The judge untied his jug and took a drink. The whiskey made him think of old Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes.

Already Muskrat was wondering why he and Tobacco had ridden into Willow Brook. Well, let him worry. Judge Bates was sure now and more sure than ever that the oldster was not implicated in illegal beaver trapping.

There was much here he could not understand. What part, if any, did Judge Emil Simpson have in this intrigue? Simpson had, up to now, always been honest. True, he was a politician, always shaking hands and always playing for political favors from men in higher positions. That's why he had let him and Tobacco pull off what they did in Willow Brook.

And Sheriff Ed Webster? Where did he fit into this puzzle? Although he appeared rather dumb, almost stupid, on the surface, Judge Bates figured the man was intelligent enough underneath. Was he just an impartial minion of the law or was he wrapped up in this skulldruggery?

And Frenchy LaFevre? Judge Bates shook his head. LaFevre was a riddle to him. But one thing was certain: he worked for Milt Jefferson, and the jurist was convinced that Jefferson was the one running illegal beaver pelts out of Willow Brook. He felt sure that Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton were innocent. Who else could the guilty party be but Milt Jefferson?

Maybe some of Jefferson's trappers, unknown to the sheepman, were trapping beaver? Judge Bates thought that hardly possible. For one thing, sooner or later Jefferson would find out about his men's treachery. And it took brains and good connections to get rid of beaver pelts on the midwest and eastern markets.

But a man could never tell. The only thing to do was to ride all leads to the ground, then pick up another lead and follow it. But first, a man had to get the lay of the ground in mind. Therefore this ride over to Jefferson's ranch.

He and Tobacco had talked the matter over that morning in their hotel room. They had decided they would not tell Muskrat Pelton, or anybody else, what had brought them to Willow Brook. For maybe Muskrat didn't even know beaver-pelts were leaving this section. Surely he did not know he was under suspicion of trapping and shipping these plews.

"Let the ol' sagehen stew in his own thoughts," Tobacco Jones had grumbled. "We gotta play a close hand, Bates. But I wonder how them pelts are gettin' shipped east? A man cain't bundle up a bunch of beaver plews an' ship them to market. Federal gamewardens would pick up the bundle pronto outa the mails. That circular we read didn't tell us how they was being smuggled out, did it?"

"Maybe the authorities did not know, Tobacco."

"Well, Jefferson's our meat, I figure. He might've figured out a way to make it look like Limpy an' Muskrat is the guilty ones. But I don't think that is possible. Do you?"

JUDGE BATES had taken a drink. "No, I don't think it is. This is the way the thing stacks up to me. On the federal books there might be only one trapper—or trapping concern—listed as operating in the Willow Brook area. And that might be Muskrat's outfit. In fact, Milt Jefferson's spread might not even be listed. Those records are sometimes dreadfully inaccurate."

From over a ridge came the bleat of sheep. When they gained the summit of the hill they saw the sheep scattered out below them. Here the wind had whipped part of the snow away and left some bare, brown earth that looked darker because it was bordered with the snow.

About two hundred head of sheep were grazing here. They saw a herder and his two dogs below them, sitting for shelter behind a big rock. He saw them, too, and waved. They rode down.

"Figured you two was Milt Jefferson and Pelican," the man said. "Need some tobaccer. What you got in that jug, stranger?"

"Melted snow water, sir."

The herder studied Judge Bates "How does your haid feel, fella?"

"Fine, sir, fine. This is the only liquid I drink. My doctor told me to drink no other liquid. Would you care to take a drink of it?"

"Not snow water."

Judge Bates held out his jug. The man backed away. Tobacco had to keep his face straight. The judge inched his mule closer and the man stepped back again. The rock stopped him.

"Try some of it."

"Hell, I don't want no snow water. Man, you must an ex-sheepherder! You're as batty as a bot-fly filled with bourbon!"

"Try it, sir."

The man couldn't back up any farther. "All right, just to humor you." He uncorked the jug and drank without smelling of it. He swallowed and a sudden happy look came into his eyes as he lowered the jug.

"Bourbon. Good ol' bourbon." He drank for a full thirty seconds. When he handed the jug back his eyes were shiny points. "I take all back them unkind words, mister. That *snow water* is really good!"

The judge took a drink. Tobacco bit off a chew. Sheep bleated and ran, cropping the sparse grass. The rock shut off the wind. The jug went around again. The sheepherder grew congenial.

The winter was hard on his sheep. Hay had been short that summer and only the best ewes were being fed at the haystacks. Judge Bates nodded. "Hay is scarce up in Montana, too, I've heard. Not much hay left in Wyoming, they tell me. What's Jefferson doing to keep his sheep alive?"

"He's putting them out in the hills in small bunches, like this bunch I've got. They can russle grass if they ain' no snow. But a bunch of them are winter-killin'. Some he won't even wait for them to die. He shoots 'em an' rips the hides off'n 'em an' ships the hides out. About every two weeks they load a big boxcar full of hides down in town an' ship them out."

"So I heard, down in Willow Brook."

"Well, Milt salvages a little out of the sheep, thataway. Otherwise, they'd all be a total loss."

THE PARTNERS rode on, the sheepherder watching them leave. Tobacco looked at a sheep and growled, "Silly danged creature. Almost as nutty as you are, Bates."

"What prompted that comparison, friend?"

"You always waste time an' talk with some bum. Look at that poor ignorant sheepherder back there—why for did you waste your time, and whiskey, talkin' to him? He ain't got brains enough to come into the barn outa a sandstorm!"

"I wanted to find out something."

"What, for instance?"

"Well, I wanted to find out all I could about Milt Jefferson."

Tobacco spat on the snow. "Well, you sure didn't learn nothin'. Only that the blaa-blaas are dyin' from lack of hay an' that they're skinnin' some of them an' sellin' the wool, pelts an' all. But hades, man, every sheep outfit does that. Bet right now that Ollie Ware is skinnin' dead sheep over on that ranch we sold him up in the Square Butte country."

"Never can tell what will help a man, Tobacco. Remember what Pope said: *'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.*"

"Who's Pope?"

Judge Bates decided to skip that. Tobacco's formal schooling, he told himself, must have been terribly

limited. Well, maybe the man was better off. When you knew too much you just had more things to worry you.

"Look, Judge."

Judge Bates followed his partner's pointing mitten. Yonder, about a half-mile away, a sorrel horse galloped along the trail that led to Jefferson's outfit. And Frenchy LaFevre was astraddle that sorrel.

"Frenchy's coming from Willow Brook town," murmured the judge. "He must've finally found out we gave him the slip this morning. He saw us go into that saloon but he never saw us go out the back and get our mules and ride out this way."

"He's goin' to report to Milt Jefferson."

They rode out on the trail and Judge Lemanuel Bates lifted his arm in greeting. Frenchy LaFevre pulled in his sorrel. "You're on Milt Jefferson's property," he said gruffly.

"You lost us in town, huh?"

Frenchy's piggish eyes studied them. "What'd you mean by that, Bates?"

"Jump over it," advised the judge. "We're going to conflab with Jefferson a spell. We want to apologize for that ruckus we all had in town."

Frenchy LaFevre eyed them rather dubiously. They jogged along. Tobacco Jones, wiry, slim, tough, was a part of his saddle, moving with each movement of his mule. So was Judge Lem Bates packed deep between rim and fork. The way they rode showed they had been raised to the leather.

But the jurist noticed that Frenchy LaFevre bounced a little when his sorrel trotted. And a saddle-man didn't bounce on a bronc. That showed him that LaFevre was not a man of the rope-and-latigo class. Was he a lumberjack?

"Those are nice jackpine over there on that ridge," the jurist said.

"Good stand of jackpine," answered LaFevre.

The judge glanced at Tobacco. The thin man's eyes showed puzzlement. He opened his mouth to correct the judge, for the trees were not jackpine—they were spruce—and then the judge winked at him without Frenchy seeing the wink. Tobacco caught on and closed his mouth.

Frenchy LaFevre was no lumberjack, either.

The judge tried other angles of conversation. Experience had told him that people liked to talk about themselves and through their conversation, many times revealed doings in their past life. But there was no talk in Frenchy LaFevre. He'd say yes or no to a question, ignore some, and answere "I don't know" to others. The judge learned exactly nothing of Frenchy's past, or got no inkling of Frenchy's future plans...if the heavy-chested man had any future plans.

They jogged along. Gear creaked as men shifted weight on stirrup leathers. Frenchy's bridle had the lower part of its reins made of light chain and the horse tossed his head now and then, making the chins rattale a little. Snow crunched under the shoes of their animals.

"Don't know if Milt Jefferson'll cotton to you two visitin' him," Frenchy stated slowly.

"We'll chance that," murmured Judge Bates.

They rounded the bend and the buildings of the sheep ranch came into light, sprawled out at the bass of a slanting, snow-covered hill. And Judge Lemanuel Bates, raised and matured in the cattle—and sheep-country, saw at a glance that Milt Jefferson did not run many head of woolies.

For the corrals were too small to hold many sheep. And the sheep-sheds, low buildings made with mud walls and buckbrush-tops, were small, too. No, they could not corral many sheep in those corrals, nor could they hold many head in the sheep-sheds.

9

A DOG CAME barking out at them. He was a short-barrelled mutt with stubby, husky legs. He had a ring of mud around his belly. Judge Bates found himself wondering how a dog would get mud in below-zero weather when all

mud was frozen.

"Quite a pooch," the jurist said.

Tobacco studied the mutt. "Sure couldn't work sheep very well, runnin' across this rough country on them short legs. Sheep dogs need a longer stride an' longer legs, so's their bellies don't rub against rocks an' cactuses."

Somewhere, other dogs were barking.

"Coyote hounds?" asked the judge.

Frenchy glanced at him. "Yeah, coyote hounds."

The dog gave up barking and trotted behind the judge's mule, smelling the animal's hocks. This done, he went to Tobacco's mule.

He sniffed along the mule's ankle. The mule lashed out suddenly, kicking hard. The cur had just opened his mouth to bite the mule in the hock. The hoof landed in is open mouth.

He ky-yipped and went skidding across the snow, stopping in a drift. He turned and loped toward the house, yipping as he ran.

"Jefferson won't like that," said LaFevre.

Neither of the partners answered. The dogs still kept yowling. They didn't sound like hounds, Judge Bates noticed. A hound has a bray but these mutts had shrill, sharp barkings.

The dog had a hole burrowed into a snowdrift. He hit this and disappeared. Frenchy LaFevre rode into the barn. "Milt's prob'ly up to the house, men."

Judge Bates and Tobacco dismounted and tied their mounts to the pine-hole hitchrack that fronted the long porch. They went up on the porch where the judge knocked at the door.

No answer.

He knocked again.

Tobacco Jones was gawking in a window. "Place looks like nobody's to home, Bates. Nice lookin' outerfit in there with a fire in the fireplace an' nice rugs an' furniture. Here comes some old gent outa the kitchen."

"Get your head back! Haven't you a bit of manners!"

The oldster proved to be the cook and housekeeper. No, Milt Jefferson wasn't around. He was either down at the bunk-house, at the barn, or out where they were skinning sheep. Where were they skinning sheep? Over the hill on the creek bottom, or course.

"Maybe he might've headed into town, men. Heard tell he had a run-in with a coupla gents there an' come out first-man in the set-to. Maybe he's headin' inter town to fist-whup 'em this time."

"Maybe so," murmured the judge.

The door closed and the partners went back to their mules. "So he come out 'first-man', huh? Why, that danged liar—"

"Don't let it canker you, Tobacco. Me, I don't care to see Jefferson—I want to look over this spread."

"Well Frenchy's still in the barn."

THEY WENT to the bunk-house. Nobody was there. They looked in the sheep-sheds; they were empty of sheep or humans. Finally they came to the shed wherein the dogs were yapping.

Three small windows were set high on the wall. They were so small the ordinary dog could never climb out of them even if he could jump that high, which was very improbable. Tobacco Jones could, while standing on tiptoe, look into the building, but the judge had to get a nearby bench and stand on it.

"Funny lookin' dogs, huh, Bates?"

The judge could hardly see the dogs for it was dark in the shed. Gradually his eyes got accustomed to the darkness and he could determine shape and color. The dogs ran along the same lines as the one who had come barking to meet them—short of leg, long of body, and powerful. They were mongrels, he figured. But what good were they?

They could never run coyote for they were so short-legged they could never catch a coyote. Most sheep outfits had a pack of hounds that a man used to run down and kill coyotes. For the coyote is the worst enemy a sheep has. Working in packs

or singly, they cut sheep out of a herd the minute the herder' back is turned. Then they kill the sheep and dine on him.

"What fer would a man use them dogs, Bates?"

Judge Bates got down from his bench. "Danged if I'd know what good they'd be for, Tobacco, alongside of eating good grub."

Frenchy LaFevre hollered from the house. "Hey, where are you gents?"

The barn sheltered them from LaFevre's gaze. The judge pushed the bench back against the wall where he'd found it and he and Tobacco led their mules in the back door of the big barn.

"We're in the barn, lookin' for you," the jurist called.

LaFevre was coming toward the barn when the partners came out the front door.

"Where you been?"

Judge Bates said they had looked in the bunk-house but had not found Milt Jefferson. LaFevre let a slow gaze run across them.

"Don't cotton to you two snoopin' aroun' here. Milt Jefferson wouldn't like it. Get on your jackasses an' ride out."

Judge Bates shrugged. "As you say."

"Don't make no difference to me. I jus' work for wages, I do. But Milt Jefferson owns this property an' I draw Milt's wages."

"We understand."

The judge kept his anger under control. The wind died down a little. The world was a snow-covered sphere.

The thermometer, the jurist thought, was still falling. White-breath-clouds suspended in front of their mule for the wind to push away. The mules labored as they climbed the grade.

Tobacco Jones grumbled, "That fella don't know the difference between a jackass an' a mule! I wished I'd'a had me a nice crowbar back there! I'd'a tapped him so hard on his thick noggin it would've busted both his arches!"

"We had no legal right on that property."

Tobacco restored his plug to his mackinaw-pocket. "All you think of is the legality of a thing! Now what did we find out, Bates? Nothin', I'd say!"

They rode west following no trail, for there was none. On a ridge they came to a wagon-road packed by the hoofs of broncs and bobsled runners. This twisted down into a small valley.

Tobacco cowled, jaws motionless. "Was that a rifle shot, Bates?"

"They're shooting woolies down yonder. Use your eyes. That's Milt Jefferson down there, too, unless my eyes deceive me."

FOUR MEN worked on the packed snow that was stained by the blood of the dead sheep. And as Judge Bates rode closer he saw how they skinned the sheep. They would skin down the four legs by hand and then tie these together with a catch-rope. They'd skin up the bottom of the neck, splitting the skin along the jugular.

Then they'd tie the four legs together fast to a pine tree. Jefferson was riding a stout saddle-horse. He took dallies around the horn and pulled the hide off the sheep, ripping it off the remainder of the legs and the body. Judge Bates remembered that buffalo hunters used to skin buffalo that way, using a team of work-broncs instead of a saddle-horse.

Jefferson untied the rope. He sat a solid saddle. "What you two gents doin' on my range?" he demanded.

Judge Bates was looking at a tall, angular man with a long neck. This, he decided, was Pelican, or whatever his name was. He reminded the jurist of a pelican, too, with his long, ungainly neck.

"We have apologies to offer, sir," Judge Lemanuel Bates used his best oratorical manner. "We rode to your domocile but not finding you at home, your houseboy told us you were in these parts, so we rode this way. We are indeed sorry for what transpired yesterday down in Willow Brook village. We all got off on the wrong foot, as one might say.'"

Pelican's eyes were shuttling over

them, reading them, cataloging them. Milt Jefferson started to say, "To hell with —" but his partner cut in with, "Your apologies are accepted, sir. You are, I take it, Judge Lemanuel Bates."

The jurist shook hands with the skinny man. He introduced Tobacco to him. The two hands shot another sheep and started to skin the hide free from his legs. Judge Bates looked at Milt Jefferson.

"Our apologies are accepted, sir?"

"Danged sorry, Bates."

They talked for a little while. Although all concerned claimed no hard feelings existed, yet an invisible wall hung between them; all of them were on guard. The Pelican pulled back into his shell.

Judge Bates allowed that they would not spend much time on Willow Brook range. According to him they had been up north, visiting Ollie Ware and his missus and baby, up in Post Hole Valley. Pelican allowed that he had heard of Ware and that sheep-ranch. They all had a drink from the judge's jug.

"Well, we got to get to work," said Jefferson. He coiled up his catch-rope.

The jurist and postmaster rode back toward Willow Brook. But when they were over the ridge, the judge swung his mule to the west.

"Ain't you goin' back to town?" demanded Tobacco Jones.

"Nope, friend. We're heading for Mill Iron."

Mill Iron was a town fifteen miles from Willow Brook, further on down the railroad. Willow Brook was the end of the line.

Tobacco scowled. "That's a long, cold ride this weather. What we aim to do in that one-cow burg, Bates?"

"Send off some telegrams."

"Why not send them from Willow Brook?"

"Don't want the depot agent there to know what these telegrams contain. I want this information kept secret. He might have a tie-up with Milt Jefferson and Pelican. What do you think of Pelican?"

Tobacco scowled. "Me, I'd say his picture is on some want-placard in some lawman's office. An' if it ain't, it sure should be." He looked at his partner. "Mind how he kept his right hand always in the pocket of his sheepskin?"

"He had a gun on us."

"You sure lied to them," muttered Tobacco Jones. "Bates, you're gettin' to be a top-notch prevaricator. Well, after all this ridin', what did we find out that amounted to somethin'?"

"Those dogs, for one. And those sheep they were shooting. Did you look good at them sheep? Hades, those animals would have pulled through the winter, I figure. Looks to me like Jefferson and Pelican were killing them for their hides, not to keep them from starving to death."

TOBACCO'S scowl deepened. "Sheep pelts ain't worth much on market, are they? Surely not as much as the sheep themselves is?"

"That's what gets me," the judge admitted, "it doesn't make sense, killing sheep for their pelts. Not where there might be a chance that the ewe pulls through the winter and raises a husky lamb the next spring."

"But what about the dogs?"

"You got me, Tobacco."

"Maybe Jefferson and Pelican just keep them for pets?"

Judge Bates scoffed at that. "Those two have no soft spots in their hearts for animals. You can tell that in them right off the bat. And so many of them—just one or two—but so many of them—Frankly, I don't understand it."

"Lots of things I don't understand here, Bates. One of them is: What t'hades we doin' on this cold, miserable range? When we could be home in Cowtrail dozin' before hot fires!"

"We come to help Muskrat Pelton."

"Ah, is it worth it?"

Judge Bates cast a sly grin at his belligerent partner. "Tobacco Jones, the milk of human kindness has turned to sour cream in your malignant bosom. Have you really cast an appreciative eye over Miss Mabel Pelton, daughter of old Muskrat Pelton? Sure, I'll admit old Muskrat isn't any model of virtue, but have

you noticed how his daughter loves the old rat?"

"She sure likes that ol' scoundrel, huh?"

"Yes, and if he went to jail..." The jurist sighed loudly. "Those eyes would lose their sparkle. To her, Muskrat, despite all his apparent faults, is still her father; her closest kin."

"I'd do anythin' for Mabel."

"That's more like it, partner."

The afternoon, short in midwinter, was turning to a dull gray as evening encroached. They sent two telegrams out of Mill Iron. One was to St. Louis, to the government game-warden there, and the other was to Washington, D. C.

"The messages contained herein are strictly private," the jurist told the operator. "The messages that come tomorrow in answer will also be strictly private. You understand that, of course?"

"I took that oath, fellow. Almost thirty odd years ago."

"Don't break it," warned the jurist.

10

MILT JEFFERSON watched Tobacco Jones and Judge Lemanuel Bates ride over the ride and disappear. He looked at Pelican, a wry smile on his full lips.

"Well, there they are, Pelican. What do you think of them?"

The skinny man shook his small head. "Dunno for sure, Milt. But I sure don't figure they're on this range for no good; I've heard of that pair before. We got hold of a federal notice sayin' authorities were figurin' that illegal beaver peltry was going off this range. That notice was sent to Judge Simpson. What's to keep Judge Bates from gettin' such a similar notice?"

Jefferson considered that. "Nothing, I guess."

"And what's to keep him and Tobacco Jones from headin' into this range to side ol' Muskrat Pelton an' Limpy Rhodes?"

Jefferson's scowl deepened. "You got somethin' there, Pelican."

"We'll watch them, Milt, watch them close. Thought you said you had Frenchy LaFevre tailin' that pair in Willow Brook? Where is Frenchy now?"

"Ridin' yonderly, Pelican."

LaFevre was riding down the slope, and his bronc slipped in the snow. Instead of pulling him up by the reins, the man hit him with his quirt across the rump. The bronc tried to jump, slid again, and somehow managed to catch his footing.

Pelican had watched this through thoughtful eyes. "That man says he's an ol' cowdog, Milt. Me, I don't figure so. Look at the way he handled that cayuse up there? He don't know nothin' about cattle, either; I've felt him out. He rides like a half-drunk homesteader. I don't like him."

"I can give him his time and tell him to ride on."

Pelican rubbed his bottom lip. "No," he finally decided, "we can keep him here. He wouldn't leave this vicinity, probably. I'd rather have him here at the ranch where we could watch him than have him hangin' aroun' town."

Jefferson glanced at his partner.

LaFevre asked, "You two see Bates and Jones? They were up to the house lookin' for you, Milt."

Jefferson told him the pair had talked to him and then ridden back toward Willow Brook. LaFevre remarked that, from the ridge, he could see the road toward town, and the pair were not on it.

"They probably went over to see Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton. What did they do last night Frenchy?"

"They got a room an' hit the sougans. Come mornin' they et breakfast and went into a saloon. Then they got their broncs an' rode out to see Muskrat Pelton an' Limpy Rhodes. Then they come here."

"What did they do at the ranch?"

LaFevre decided not to tell them that Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones had managed to look the place over while he had been unsaddling his tired bronc. "They talked with cookie, who told 'em you were over here, an' they rid this way."

"Where's Sheriff Ed Webster?"

"Down in town, I reckon. You wanta see him about somethin'? I can ride into town an' tell him."

Milt Jefferson shook his head. "Nothin' important." He handed Frenchy LaFevre the end of his catch-rope. "The boys got this one ready to pull the hide off'n. Take your dallies an' use your bronc, Frenchy! My animal is sorta tired."

Frenchy took the rope. He turned his bronc with his rump toward the sheep, its four legs tied to a stout sapling. Jefferson watched him take his dallies. He noticed that Frenchy just wrapped the rope around the horn about five times and hung onto the free end. A real cowpuncher doesn't take dallies that way.

By just wrapping the hemp around the horn, a cowpuncher hasn't enough leverage to counteract the pull of a hard load—a big steer or cow, or anything needing a strong pull. He wraps the rope about three times, then comes under it with the free end, and runs that a few times around the horn, locking the rope in tightly. That way, the odds of leverage are on his side, not the cows.

Frenchy kicked his bronc and the rope tightened. His horse, a good rope horse, bunched up and pulled, shoulder muscles knotted. The dallies slipped a little but Frenchy held them. The skin gave and he ripped it off the sheep.

"Go to the bunkhouse an' catch some shut-eye." Jefferson said almost gently. "You didn't get much sleep last night, I reckon."

"Well, I could stand some sleep."

FRENCHY LaFevre handed the rope back to Jefferson. He rode up the ridge. But he did not go to the bunkhouse. He squatted in the brush, his horse and himself hidden, and he watched the men toiling below.

"You notice his dallies?" Jefferson spoke to Pelican.

Pelican nodded. "No old cowpuncher would dally that way."

The men had another sheep ready to skin. Jefferson turned his bronc around and watched the men, waiting for a go-ahead signal. Pelican walked out into the brush. Jefferson had skinned three more woolies by the time his partner returned. Pelican spoke in a very low voice so the hired hands would not hear.

"He didn't head into camp, Milt."

"Where is he?"

"Hid, up in the bresh. Watchin' us."

Jefferson's lips formed "Oh" very softly and significantly.

They skinned six more sheep. Pelican said, "Nuff work for today." One of the men had a small, home-made sled. They piled the bloody hides on this and headed for the home-ranch, pulling the sled behind a saddlehorse by a rope. When they came into the barn Frenchy LaFevre was cleaning the stalls.

"Figured this was a job to be done, Jefferson."

Jefferson nodded.

They unstripped their horses and hung up their kaks. The gray light of the wintery day was changing to darkness. Already the herders had corraled their sheep in the sheds and corrals. A man was unhooking his team from a hayrack.

"Runnin' short of bluejoint hay, Jefferson. Got to start feedin' that worthless stuff we cut along the crick—that buckbrush an' slough grass—about day after tomorrow."

"Well, it beats eatin' snow drifts."

"Not by much, Milt. We found a dead ewe in the bresh today. Cut her open an' foun' buckbrush matted up in her belly. We skinned her an' throwed the hide high over a young cottonwood tree so the coyoties wouldn't get it. Man, them dogs of your'n are sure howlin'! Fellow cain't hear hisself talk even. What for do you keep them ignerant pooches for, Milt?"

"Company, Ike."

Ike shook his head as he led his team into the barn. "Poor company, I'd say. Remind me of the week I was a married man. She was yappin' at my heels all the time—"Ike, do this—" His voice trailed off as he entered the barn.

Jefferson and Pelican went to the house. The fireplace was red with pine knots and the odors of cinnamon

and good food came from the kitchen. They took off mackinaws and while Pelican stood in front of the fire warming his hands, Jefferson went to the corner-cupboard and took out a pint of whiskey.

"How much, Pelican?"

"One jigger."

The cook stuck his head out of the kitchen. "Two buzzards lookin' for you gents today. One fat, t'other tall. Homely lookin' pair. Tol' 'em where you was. You see them?"

"We seen 'em."

"Chuck's on the way."

The head pulled back. Jefferson and Pelican drank. The cook carried in a tray of boiled meat. Jefferson, for the first time, realized how hungry he was. The cook made a few more trips back to the kitchen and then found his chair.

"She's on the board, men."

The whiskey was warm in Jefferson's belly. It had hit him fast because of his empty stomach. He looked at the array of dishes.

"Sure glad we pulled you out of that Cheyenne jail, cookie."

"You've said that before," the cook growled. "Hell, I forget the pepper." He went into his kitchen.

THEY ATE slowly, for they were tired. The meal finished, Jefferson offered to help the cook with the dishes, but the man told him to go to. Jefferson grinned and found a chair by the fire. The cook, to a stranger, would sound like a frosty, tough old rooster. But that was just a surface coat.

Underneath, there was only one man in the world, and that man was Milt Jefferson. Jefferson had found him, three years b e f o r e, in a Cheyenne jail. He had been in the saloon when the town marshal had dragged the drunken, howling oldster out and taken him to jail. And pity had pulled at Milt Jefferson.

"Too bad," he'd murmured to the barkeeper.

"I cain't see it that way, stranger. That ol' soak knows what whiskey does to him. He's the biggest nuisance in town. Why feel sorry for him?"

"He cain't help it."

"I think he can."

Jefferson and Pelican had bailed the oldster out. They had taken him to board with them, for they were laying around town that winter, and, unknown to the drunkard, they had slipped a "cure" into everything he drank. The old man suddenly found himself possessing a violent dislike for the taste or odor of whiskey.

"Must be the good influence you two boys have on me" he said, grinning.

Pelican took a drink. "Oh, sure."

That spring they had settled on Mule Deer Creek. The recluse had become their cook and housekeeper. That fall they had told him about slipping him the "cure." He'd grinned and said, "Dang you hellions. You sure double-crossed me." But his voice, Jefferson had noticed, was a little too husky.

Pelican said. "We better get to work. That load of sheep pelts will go out about nine tomorrow mornin'. I guess. The car is on sidin' now in Willow Brook. We got the pelts hauled down there ready to load."

Jefferson said, "Get warm first, fellow."

But restlessness was with Pelican. He walked the floor, lanky legs taking big strides. He stopped.

"This Bates—And this Jones gent —By hell, Jefferson, if they try to block our business here—We got lots of money tied up here. We've got lots to make yet out of beaver pelts. If they get in my way, I'll kill them!"

"They might have something to say about that."

Pelican studied him.

"They both pack shotguns in their saddle-boots," reminded Jefferson. "They can use them, too, I understand."

"A shotgun is only good for close range. At a distance, I'd say they wouldn't do much damage."

"They pack short-guns, too."

Pelican's tone was hard. "By hell, they try to block me—" He looked into the fire. "I'm goin' to work, partner."

Jefferson nodded. "I'm goin' to see where LaFevre is."

Pelican went into a lean-to behind the ranch-house. There was no fire here and the room was cold, kept that way because of the beaver pelts that hung on the wall. The pelts were dry, the skin crackly. On the floor lay the hides of sheep, dried also. A barrel of fine salt stood in the corner, the top knocked out.

The beaver pelts, belly-side out, were nailed on stretchers, which in turn were hung on the wall. Pelican ran his fingers over the inside surface of the pelt and judged its dryness. His sunken eyes glowed. The pelt was dry enough to ship.

Standing there in the dim lamplight, he looked at the pelts. A number of them were still too raw, he figured. The lamplight cast flickering, jumping shadows on the dark wall. The scene was unreal, almost ghostly.

There was the smell of the hides in the slow air. The smell of sheepskins, oily and rich, and the dry, tangy odor of fine beaver.

Jefferson entered.

"Where's LaFevre?"

"In the bunkhouse. We better get to work. We got to get these pelts packed, and ready for shipment. We got to get them into Willow Brook before morning comes. There's a long night ahead of us."

"But a profitable one, Jefferson."

11

OLD LIMPY RHODES and Muskrat Pelton came to when the fire went low and the cabbin became cold. Muskrat Pelton was the first to get out of bed. He put on his pan-cake muskrat-skin cap and he was dressed.

Limpy sat up. "Where are we?"

"At home, of courst. What t'hades is wrong with you? Where do you figure you'd be, you ol' souse?"

"Don't call me an ol' souse, you ol' bottle-lover!"

Muskrat looked at their alarm clock. "We'd better get movin'. We ain't read traps for a day an' my line oughta have some peltry. I can work it before dark, too, if I move fast enough. Wonder where Bates an' Jones went?"

"Mebbe they went back to Cow-trail."

Muskrat snorted. "They ain't had much of visit, yet. Nah, they'll stick aroun' a few days." He was chewing on a piece of pemmican. "Well, I'm goin' out an' work my traps, scissor-bill."

They dressed themselves for the trap-line. They put on heavy sheepskin coats and Muskrat wrapped a scarf around his collar as an added protection from the wind. They pulled on their overshoes and buckled them. Muskrat carried his 30-30 and Limpy toted his .25-35 rifle. Both had small clubs. These hung from their belts by buckskin thongs attached to the club by a hole drilled through its handle.

Two small creeks, completely frozen over now, met right below their cabin. One was Boxelder Creek and the other was Rock Creek. Muskrat ran his trap line up Rock; Limpy had Boxelder. Because of their late start they would not be back until dark. They split up, snow-shoes webbing the loose snow, and started their work.

Muskrat Pelton, true to his monicker, was an expert on trapping muskrats. One look at a stream in the fall and he could tell where the muskrat dens were and about how many muskrats were in the stream. He had his traps set in runways the muskrats used to go from the dens—either in the bank, or in mounds—into the deep water. These runways were frozen over now, of course.

Muskrat chopped his way down to his traps. Out of each one he invariably took a muskrat. Some were dark of pelt—Dark Northern rats—and others were silvery gray or a light blue. Most of them were dead in the number-one traps. They had drowned, for the weight of the trap had pulled them to the bottom.

The old trapper put the stiff carcasses in his sack and reset his traps. Soon the holes he had cut would freeze shut again. He had made some good catches. But he made a promise

he would tend to his traps every day. Some of these 'rats had been caught for two days. Had he emptied his traps yesterday, he would have caught another 'rat after that one.

Darkness was coming down on him, but that didn't bother him much. For one thing, with the white, untrampled snow on the ground, there would be some light from it. Enough to work a trap line.

Two coyotes trotted east across the head of the creek, but the night was too dark to find sights so Muskrat let them go unhindered. Coyote hides were worth money, though, and he had some traps set—number-fours—A coyote is wary. A man has to smoke a trap before setting it to kill the man-scent and then, when he sets it, he has to use new gloves that have no man-scent on them. Then he has to put some paper or oilskin under the traps to keep them from freezing down in the snow. Muskrat wondered if there would be any snow soon. If he thought it would snow, he'd put down some coyote traps, for the loose snow would cover them and kill all man-scent.

He watched the coyotes go over the ridge. He grinned. Maybe they were going to kill some of Milt Jefferson's sheep. Well, that was all right with him. He batted a live muskrat over the head with his short club and put him in the sack. His sack was getting heavy.

He wet his lips and thought of Judge Bates' jug.

HE CAME TO the head of Rock Creek. By that time, his sack was filled with dead muskrats, and darkness was on him. He was some ten miles from their cabin. He had some traps set for mink, too; they were over the ridge on a little stream that consisted of pot-holes and only ran when the snow melted in the spring.

He'd read mink sign over there. And a mink, experience had taught him, usually follows the same trail week after week. A man didn't need a bait for a muskrat, for the trap was place in the runway under water, and the muskrat had to walk into it. A mink, though, could travel equally well on land or water; but he did not swim under the ice like a beaver or muskrat could.

On his previous trip Muskrat had shot a cottontail rabbit. He had not skinned him, but he had taken him and buried him in a steep bank, putting the snow back on the rabbit who lay under it, covered by a thin layer of ground. To outward appearances a man would think a coyote had killed something and buried it there.

Around this spot, Muskrat had placed number-one traps, their pans covered lightly with loose snow. Now when he came on this spot he saw where a struggle had evidently taken place, for the snow was packed and dirty. The mink was dead. He had died fighting the trap.

He sprung the trap and took the mink out. The animal was dirty with mud and the pelt was clogged and filthy. Muskrat put the thin weasel-like animal into his sack with the muskrats. He snowshoed on toward home. He had four other mink sets out but they were empty.

He cut the signs of a bobcat, saw tracks left by coyotes and jackrabbits and cottontails. He shot two nice plump cottontails and decided to have them for supper tomorrow, after he'd skinned them and let them freeze outside over night. But he'd have to hang them in the lean-to, he decided. Otherwise the magpies would fly in and peck them to pieces.

Or maybe the magpies weren't hungry now. Maybe they had enough grub, seeing Milt Jefferson was shooting weak sheep and skinning them.

He had seen some beaver sign over on Rock Creek, but there were not many beavers there, he knew. He'd scouted the creek in the fall preparatory to the trapping season. He'd some beaver, but not many. For one thing, there wasn't enough water in Rock Creek, and what there was too shallow.

A BEAVER likes plenty of water. If the stream is shallow, he builds dams of short branches he gnaws off with his sharp teeth. He

drags these into the water and swims with them downstream to the site of the dam. He is smart; he never cuts trees below the damsite, for it would be hard to pull these against the current. He cuts them above and has the current help float them down as he guides their course.

The log at the proper place, he weights it down with mud, putting it on the log with his broad, flat tail. At the bottom of the dam he places small logs, usually branches from pine or spruce or cottonwood trees. He knows that small logs will sink with less mud on them, and he is a practical fellow.

Furthermore, he builds the dam, wider at the bottom. He dives down and personally places the log into place. From this wide foundation, he builds one side of the dam for a while, using the other half as a spillway. Then he goes to the other side and builds it up, using the other half as a spillway. Finally he has the water to the height he wants it. Then he levels the dam off and braces it with extra sticks and mud.

He dams up the water for two purposes: he wants plenty of deep water to swim in, and he wants to raise it so he can dig a hole into the bank where he can raise his young. For his safety lies in deep water.

Sometimes a coyote catches a beaver on bank when he is gnawing down a tree, for the beaver is very nearsighted. Coyotes seem to know this and they come on him from the downwind side, so he cannot scent them through his well-keened nose. Usually quite a fight follows. Sometimes the beaver, hacking with his sharp foreclaws, snarling with his long teeth, drags a coyote into the water. Once in the water, of course, the beaver is the master.

When ice comes to cover the stream, the beaver is not caught unprepared. He has two entrances into his den. One is level with the top of the ice, and through this he can come out under the ice. He need not come to air to keep breathing. When the air in his lungs loses its value, he floats to the bottom of the ice, expells it from his lungs, and it forms a huge bubble. He waits patiently until it renews its elements, then breathes it again, and continues on his way under the ice until he is forced to stop again and renew the air.

NOW MUSKRAT stopped and looked at the entrance of a beaver hole. He knew that another entrance was below this one, coming in from the bottom of the creek He had dug out a number of beaver dens. The shafts left the water and went straight back into the bank, then lifted suddenly and went up a few feet above water line, where the beaver built his den by moving dirt out in a circle. Sometimes he had dug as many a ten beaver out of a single den.

It was hard, gruelling work, much harder than trapping them. But Muskrat Pelton wasn't trapping any beaver. He lived by the game laws and beaver were protected, though sometimes he figured the law was a little unjust. Like over on Mule Deer Creek. He'd scouted that last fall. Jefferson had not known he was on his land. But Mule Deer had been filled with beaver. Big beaver, too.

The moon came up. He was still three miles from the home cabin. Suddenly he saw two riders on the ridge to his left. Beside them a man plodded through the snow. He felt a sudden tightening run through him. Jefferson's riders?

No...These men rode mules. And that one gent—the one on foot—looked like Limpy. Hades, it *was* Limpy. And the two mounted men were Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones. Muskrat Pelton cupped his mittens to his lips and hollered.

"Hallloooo... Down this way, men. Muskrat Pelton hollerin'."

Limpy's bellow answered. "Up this way, pard."

Five minutes later, Muskrat Pelton stood puffing in front of them. "What goes on, Bates? Where you bin?"

"We rode back into the hills," fabricated the jurist. "We found some ripples back there where the water flowed so fast it never froze. We

dropped some hooks into it and spent the afternoon fishing."

"Never caught nothin' though," grumbled Tobacco.

"Hungry?" asked Limpy.

"Hungry as a catfish in a meat market," stated the jurist. "What say we repair to your domicile and re-fuel, friends?"

"Don't need to go that far," Muskrat said. "Coupla two, three miles to our cabin. They's a cabin over the hill where we has some supplies cached in times of an emergency. Like when that freak sudden snow storm caught us two weeks ago. Danged snow got so thick we figgered we couldn't make home so we hit into this shack an' spent the night."

"We got a ham there," Limpy said.

Tobacco said, "Lead the way."

The partners were tired from their ride into Mill Iron and back. The air was getting colder, too. The cabin looked inviting, its roof covered with snow. It was made of chinked logs.

There was no lock on the door. One of the unwritten laws of the cow-country and trapping-country forbade locks on doors. For if a man had been starving, or caught in a blizzard —and he came to a locked cabin . . . Soon they had a roaring fire of balsam wood in the heater.

LIMPY AND Tobacco set to work with skillet and pan. Muskrat Pelton glanced appraisingly at Judge Lem Bates' jug. The judge saw his glance but said nothing. Finally Muskrat asked, "How about a nip, Judge?"

"I forgot my jug on my saddle."

"Hades, it's right there, next to the door."

"Well, so it is!"

Muskrat drank and the judge drank and Limpy came over from the stove and took a nip. Tobacco glowered at the eggs. "You ol' souses startin' again, huh?"

They loaded the small table with grub. The judge set to with gusto, lowering the supply of ham greatly. He told about riding over and seeing Jefferson and Pelican, but he did not mention their ride to Mill Iron.

Muskrat and Limpy had no coffee. Instead, they drank whiskey straight. They were pretty tipsy when they left the cabin round midnight. Muskrat was intent on singing a ribald song, and Limpy was just as intent on his not singing it.

"Shet up, Muskrat, or I'll bat your mug in!"

"Don't argue with me, Limpy!" Don't get me to waste my feeble strength matchin' backs with you! I'll need all my strength to skin my day's catch when I finally get home. Lemme sing, man."

"You won't sing that song!"

The judge and Tobacco were leading their mules. They walked along with Limpy and Muskrat. For one thing, the pair of trappers walked so slowly the mules would soon leave them behind, even if they found their slowest gait. For another, the night was turning deadly cold, and a man almost had to walk to keep warm.

Tobacco shook his head. "What a racket, Bates."

"Better indeed then letting them engage in fisticuffs."

"The coyotes will be sick, lissenin' to such a howlin'."

Finally they came to the cabin where the cabin where the creeks met. While the judge and Tobacco unsaddled their mules the two partners went into the house. Suddenly the jurist jerked erect.

"Who emitted that roar, Tobacco?"

Tobacco hung his saddle over the saddle-rack. "Muskrat, it sounded like. Bates, let's not spend the night here. Me, I don't like your drunken rabble of associates. Let's mosey on into Willow Brook."

"Night's almost gone, Tobacco."

"Hey, Bates! Hey, Tobacco! Come on the gallop! My knife is stickin' in a dead man's back!"

"He's got the d.t's now, Bates."

Judge Bates was scowling. "He hasn't imbibed much, friend. I wonder what he wants—" Already he was moving toward the front door.

Tobacco followed him, grumbling.

Somebody had lit the lamp in the

cabin. The flickering light showed Limpy's pale face. He was gibbering like he'd seen a ghost. Trembling with fear, Muskrat Pelton was sticking out his arm, finger pointing downward.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Bates! Tell me I'm seein' things! Tell me that ain't a dead man! Tell me those, Bates!"

Judge Bates stood solid and tough. For a man lay on his face, there on the floor. He had a knife in his back.

"That your knife, Muskrat?"

"My knife, Bates. I left it here t' home. Never took it with me. Then, there is a man there?"

"Who is he?" demanded Limpy.

Judge Bates pulled the knife from the man's back. Then he knelt and, with Tobacco's help, he rolled the man over. A chunky, unshaven face showed up, the lips loose in death.

"Frenchy LaFevre," breathed Limpy.

"And dead," growled Muskrat. "With my knife in his back! Hades, man, I never kilt him! Somebody's kilt him an' toted him in here! But my knife—in his back—"

"Every man stand till. Don't reach for a weapon!"

The harsh voice came from the side-room. Judge Bates looked at the man standing there, just inside the drapes hung across the diamond-willow rod. And that man, he saw, was Sheriff Ed Webster.

"You're all under arrest, men! An' the charge is murder!"

12

MABEL PELTON looked at them reproachfully. Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones were in one cell and Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes were in the adjoining cell.

"What a fine looking bunch you make," the girl said.

Her voice was calm, the judge noticed, but there was worry behind it. He grinned in an attempt to reassure her. "They shifted cells on us this time, Miss Mabel. Last time Tobacco and I were in the cell now occupied by your father and Limpy."

"Yeah, and we like that cell the best," Tobacco Jones said. "Bunks are more comfortable in it."

"I miss my jug," Judge Bates said.

The girl looked up and down the bull-pen. Nobody was watching from the sheriff's office, although the door was open. She slipped a half-pint of bourbon through the bars and Judge Bates put it in his inside coat pocket.

"Where's my bottle?" demanded Muskrat. "Where is the bottle you brought for your old father, honey?"

"You get no more whiskey! Look, when whiskey drives you to stick a knife in a man's back— Well, it's time you quit, dad!"

Muskrat shook his long head dolefully. "Girl, don't you trust your ol' pappy? The man who reared you an' wiped your nose when you was a button... Don't you trust him? Hades, I never kilt Frenchy LaFevre!"

"But your knife was in him!"

Muskrat spoke with a dramatic slowness. "But my hand did not plunge it into his back, honey."

Mabel was almost hysterical. She appealed to Judge Lemanuel Bates. "Judge Bates, what in heaven's name is wrong on this range? Of course, dad never killed Frenchy LeFevre! You yourself have told me that dad was with you. Then who killed LaFevre, and who took him over to dad's cabin?"

"He came there, I believe, of his own accord."

"Why? To kill father?"

For a moment the jurist was silent. Tobacco was watching him closely, jaw working slowly. Limpy Rhodes sat on the cot in the adjoining cell, watching through the bars. Muskrat Pelton stood silent, eyes also on Judge Bates.

"I'm sure I don't know. In fact, my assumption that he came of his own accord may be false. Perhaps unknown hands carried him there and put Muskrat's knife in his back. But surely somebody wants Muskrat sentenced to jail."

"Who would that be?"

Muskrat Pelton answered that. "Who t'hades would it be, gal, but

Milt Jefferson an' that fine-feathered pal of his'n, Pelican? They want me off that trappin' range; they want Limpy off, too!"

"But murder—"

Judge Bates put his chubby hands over Mabel's. "Honey, don't worry about your father. My watch shows me it is around seven o'clock. Go wake up Judge Emil Simpson, and have him come immediately to the jail."

"He'll be having breakfast now judge."

"Yeah, get us outa here," said Muskrat.

The girl left, her heels clicking on the concrete floor. They heard her exchange a few words with Sheriff Ed Webster. Judge Bates sat down on the bed and put his massive head in his hands.

"Twice in this jail," he murmured. "Hard to believe. Me, a judge, sitting in a jail."

"But we're here," stated the practical-minded Tobacco.

SHERIFF ED Webster clomped down the aisle. "You men cotton to a little mornin' chuck?"

Limpy shook his head dismally, so did Muskrat. Tobacco murmured, "We'd jest et, lawman. Me, I ain't hungry."

"How about you, fat man?"

Judge Bates winced at the words *fat man,* but held his temper. "How come you happened to ride into Muskrat's cabin, just as we found Frenchy LaFevre dead?"

"We'll have that at the coroner's inquest, fat man."

"I hate the sight of you," said Judge Bates.

Webster held up a threatening finger. "Them words can be used ag'in you, Bates. You threatened me!"

"Oh, get out!"

Webster puffed, "I'll report this insurbordeenation to Judge Simpson." He clomped out and Tobacco Jones spat after him. The gob of tobacco juice hit Webster on the back. He jumped, pivoted, and when he faced them, his six-shooter covered them.

"Who threw that?"

A silence.

Webster came back. "Who tossed that hunk of wood at me?"

"What hunk of wood?" Judge Bates let his brows rise. "Do you see a hunk of wood lying anywhere in that cell aisle?"

Sheriff Webster looked around. "Nope, don't see none. Then what did you hit me with?"

"Why sir, you are imagining things, I am sure. None of us, I assure you, pegged an article at you. You will remember, sir, that you searched us thoroughly before incarcerating us, and none of us has a solid object on us, except my small watch."

"That's right. Then, what socked me?"

"Your nerves are touchy, sir. You should have better control of yourself. Practice nerve control, sir."

Webster's small eyes showed doubt. He turned and walked away. Tobacco pursed his lips and was ready to launch another gob of tobacco when the jurist clamped his hand over his partner's mouth.

Just then Webster turned suddenly, gun rising again. He stood wide-legged, puzzled, as he glimpsed the judge jerk his hand down from Tobacco's mouth. He frowned, plainly undecided, and studied the judge.

"What're you doin', fat man?"

"Nothing, sir."

Webster looked at them, one by one, eyes hard. Then he turned and went into his office. The judge sat down beside Tobacco and took out the bottle Mabel had smuggled him. Tobacco glanced sourly at him and moved down to the other end of the bunk.

"Whiskey...Not only the root of all evil, but the entire bush. Well, Bates, you claim your so smart. How you goin' git us outa this calaboose this time? Work that dog-gummed Webster over again?"

Judge Bates lowered his bottle. "The girl is a judge of fine whiskey... No, I'm afraid Webster, ignorant as he is, would not fall for that ruse again."

"How about a drink?" Muskrat asked.

"None for you, sir. Your daughter said specifically you should get no

liquor. And besides, there is very little for me."

"Ah, Bates..."

"Shut up an' sit down!" snarled Tobacco.

Judge Bates glanced at his partner in surprise. He had never seen Tobacco so irritable before. Well, the lanky postmaster had just reason. Jailed twice inside of two days after riding almost two hundred miles through a snowstorm... The judge gave his thoughts to Frenchy LaFevre.

Who had killed the stocky man? He didn't know; but he had a hunch. And how had Sheriff Ed Webster happened to be out at Muskrat's cabin? Had Webster killed LaFevre, stationed his body there to blame the killing on Limpy and Muskrat? Had Webster plunged Muskrat's knife into LaFevre's back?

Judge Bates seriously doubted this theory. For one thing, he doubted if Sheriff Webster would dare murder a man. He didn't think the sheriff possessed the intestinal fortitude to scheme and bring about a man's demise. Then who had killed LaFevre?

Another thing bothered the jurist. Had LaFevre come to the cabin or had his body been carried there? And if he had come of his own accord to the cabin, what had been the object of his visit? Surely not to kill Limpy or Muskrat. The two old timers were good whipping-boys for Milt Jefferson and Pelican. On them they were laying the charge of trapping illegal beaver.

THE JURIST finally had to give up. There was just one clue, and if he could find that, he would know why LaFevre happened to be in the cabin, a knife in his back. And he should find that clue inside of twenty-four hours, he figured.

Judge Simpson came in fifteen minutes, his scrawny neck wrapped in a heavy woolen muffler. "Cold out sirs," he said. "Now, Judge Bates what can I do for you?"

"Get me out of here."

"But I have talked with Sheriff Ed Webster, judge. He has filed murder charges against the four of you."

"But what about bail? Surely you are not going to hold my partner and myself until a coroner's jury affixes its verdict? If Sheriff Webster has filed murder charges against Limpy Rhodes and Mr. Jones and myself, he can be cited for false arrest. For neither of us can be charged with murder. Whose knife was found in LaFevre's back?"

"One belonging to Mr. Pelton, I understand." Judge Simpson lifted a bony hand. "Now, Muskrat, don't jump at conclusions. I am only stating evidence submitted me by the sheriff, not legal findings."

The upshot was that Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones were released. With Judge Simpson, they went into the sheriff's office, where Ed Webster sat in apparent disgust.

"Judge Simpson, what in the hell is the use of me doin' my duty? I arrest four men on suspicion of murder, an' you turn two of them loose."

"I am responsible for them, personally, Sheriff."

The sheriff studied his dirty fingernails. "Well, I'm no legal light; me, I don't know much about the law. But I'm goin' consult the county attorney on this, sir."

"His findings, Sheriff Webster will coincide with those of Judge Simpson." Judge Bates rescued his jug from the desk and shook it. "Sir a prisoner's goods are not to be tampered with or consumed by the sheriff making an arrest. Before I leave this town, I'll get a quart of good whiskey out of you."

"Try it, Bates; jus' try it!"

Back of them Limpy Rhodes bawled, "Hey, Bates! How about me an' Muskrat? We gonna rot in this danged cell?"

Judge Bates winked at Tobacco Jones. Seemingly he had not heard the trapper's lusty call. He and his partner and Judge Simpson went outside. Down at the depot an engine tooted, the sound shrill on the cold air.

"The local freight, about ready to hit back for the division point," explained Judge Simpson. "You will come to the house, sirs, where my

good wife has breakfast ready for three?"

Judge Bates grinned. "You figured Tobacco and I would come back with you? Thank you kindly, sir. Could you consume another breakfast, partner?"

"I kin eat anytime, an' you know it."

Snow crunched under their overshoes. Judge Bates told Judge Simpson how they had found Frenchy LaFevre dead with the knife in his back in Muskrat's cabin. Judge Simpson shook his gaunt, funeral head slowly. He pushed his long Roman nose with his mitten.

"There is much here I do not understand, sir. For instance, if you'll pardon my bluntness, will you kindly inform me if the sole purpose of your trip was to visit these two old drunk—ah, these two old pals of yours—or did it—the visit, I mean—have a greater significance? Or am I being too inquisitive, Judge Bates?"

They were in the hall, taking off their coats and overshoes. From the kitchen came the fragrant odors of sliced bacon and hotcakes. Judge Bates heard a woman moving in the living room.

"Breakfast is ready, men."

Mrs. Simpson was a motherly woman. Their two little girls, she told the judge and Tobacco, were still asleep, but she would have to waken them soon to get ready for school. She had heard her husband speak highly of Judge Bates.

"Thank you kindly, madam. Perchance your estimation has sunk a few degrees, seeing I have twice been a resident in the local calaboose?"

"Sheriff Webster makes many mistakes."

The homey atmosphere of the residence struck the judge with a homesick chord. Upstairs the children were stirring and calling. Their mother went up to silence them. The meal was excellent.

"I asked you a question, Judge Bates. Perhaps you do not care to answer it?"

JUDGE BATES leaned back in his chair. He was sure now that Judge Simpson was honest and above board. A man with a splendid home, a fine wife, and two little girls—well, he didn't want to get messed up in trouble outside the law. For Judge Bates knew that sooner or later, every crook is brought to court. And he knew Judge Simpson, who had spent many hours on the bench, was aware of this, too.

He told the judge about the illegal trapping of beaver.

"You read that from a government circular, Judge Bates? Why, sir, I read each circular to the last word, and I have never found that information."

"Are you sure?"

"I am very sure."

Judge Bates looked around cautiously. Mrs. Simpson was still upstairs. He uncorked his jug and drank. "Maybe somebody at the court-house apprehended it in your mail and disposed of it?"

Judge Simpson stroked his long chin. "That," he said, "might be the case. Well, sir, I am indeed glad you told me this. We shall work together. Now how about your two friends, Mr. Pelton and Mr. Rhodes?"

"Keep them in jail."

"And why?"

"Somebody might kill them outside. In jail, they're safe. We can't break Mabel Pelton's fine heart."

"We certainly shan't Judge Bates."

13

THERE goes the local freight," Judge Simpson said.

They could see the train leave town, smoke coming from the lignite in its firebox. It chugged and pulled and got out of sight. From the kitchen window Judge Bates could see the depot platform, about a block away. And he studied the men standing on it watching the train leave town.

"Looks like Milt Jefferson on the platform, with Pelican alongside of him. Yes, and some Box sheephands, it looks from here."

"They just shipped a carload of pelts out," Judge Simpson informed. "They go east to the leather mills.

Here, Judge Bates, will you have some more coffee? I shall, of course, keep to myself the information you have given me."

"By all means, Judge Simpson."

"And I shall check the court-house sir, and find out where my mail is going to. For I am sure I should have received one of the circulars you mention."

Judge Lem Bates sat deep in his chair, thick with reflections. He heard the train whistle a mile or so out of the town. So Milt Jefferson and Pelican had shipped out some sheep pelts, huh? Was there any tie-up between this shipment and the shipment of illegally-trapped beaver pelts? He wished he could have looked the carload over before it had been sealed.

He talked Judge Simpson into holding the coroner's inquest over Frenchy LaFevre that afternoon at three. The meal finished, he thanked the judge and his wife, and he and Tobacco went to the hardware store, which was also used as a morgue. The owner of the store was a carpenter who made caskets.

The man took them to the back-room. Here Frenchy LaFevre lay on his back on a bench. The man stood in the doorway. "The sheriff and Judge Simpson told me not to leave anybody alone with the corpse."

"That's your duty," acknowledged Judge Bates.

"Me, I don't cotton to dead folks," Tobacco said.

"Why not? What is there terrible about a dead man? You'll be one some day, my friend. Here, help me roll the corpse over?"

"Uh-unph! Not me!"

The hardware man helped the judge get Frenchy LaFevre on his back. The corpse was undressed except for a towel around the hips. Therefore the man's back was broad and Judge Bates could easily see where the knife wounds were.

For there were, he noticed with surprise, two knife-holes. One seemed a little smaller than the other; it was down lower toward the belt. The judge asked the hardware man if he had a ruler. The man said he would get one and left.

Judge Bates worked hurriedly. He got LaFevre's thick shirt and laid it along his back, matching the holes in the shirt with those in his back. The bottom hole, he saw was off, for it didn't jibe with the hole in the shirt. Also, it was smaller than the top hole.

Quickly Judge Bates looked at LaFevre's mackinaw. The top hole in the mackinaw coincided with the top hole in LaFevre's back, but the bottom hole in the coat was not as low as the bottom hole in LaFevre. The position of the bottom hole in the shirt and the bottom hole in the mackinaw did not coincide, either.

"What t'hades you doin'?" Tobacco marvelled.

By the time the hardware man came back, Judge Bates had the mackinaw and shirt back on the bench, and he was standing seemingly waiting for the man. The man had a steel ruler. Carefully the judge measured the length of the two cuts. One, he noticed, was shorter than the other. The bottom one had been made by a knife other than Muskrat Pelton's—evidently a thinner knife, and maybe longer. He shielded his measurements from the hardware man who craned his neck around but could not catch the significance of the judge's actions.

"Why for use that scale?" the hardware man asked.

Judge Bates handed back the steel rule. "Thank you, sir." He and Tobacco went outside. Tobacco wore a puzzled scowl and he spat into the snow. They went into the Ace Down where the judge ordered his jug filled and slapped the bar for attention.

"Belly up, men, and name your poison! This is a farewell drink of Judge Lamanuel Bates! After the inquest this afternoon, we leave your fair metropolis! Drink deep, men!"

MILT JEFFERSON and Pelican were at the bar. There were only three or four others in the saloon. They all trooped to the bar. Jefferson and Pelican moved down closer to Judge Bates.

"Leavin' our good country, huh, Bates?" Milt Jefferson asked.

Pelican was silent.

The bartender slid a bottle and glass out to Tobacco, who shook his head sourly. "Some grapejuice, if you have some."

"Grapejuice!"

The drinkers were looking at the postmaster. "Yeah, grapejuice! That comes from grapes, you know! You've heard of it, I suppose, even if you h'ain't seen any of it."

"What a joke," cackled the bartender. He left the whiskey bottle and glass and went down the bar.

"Yeah," said Bates, in answer to Jefferson's question, "sure am. Of course, unless they indict me this afternoon on this murder charge. But I hardly think that is possible."

"Well, they'll have to charge Muskrat Pelton with murder." The Pelican's voice was harsh. "They found his knife in Frenchy's back, they tell me!"

Judge Bates looked flatly at the long-necked man. "What was Frenchy doing over to Muskrat's cabin? Had you two sent him over there?"

Pelican blinked, eyes without thoughts. Milt Jefferson laughed a little, but it wasn't a pretty laugh. "We fired Frenchy yesterday mornin'. Tol' him to get t'hell off the Box an' stay off. He weren't no account. They tell me he picked them two fights with Muskrat an' Limpy. We don't want no trouble, Bates. Me an' Pelican are jus' two hard-workers tryin' to trap some an' raise a few woolies."

Judge Bates nodded, raising his glass. "That's all right with us, Jefferson. Tobacco and I just stopped off for a few days while riding through to Cowtrail. Unfortunately, we got involved with Muskrat Pelton, due to old acquaintanceship. Drink again, sir? You too, Pelican?"

They all drank except Tobacco Jones, who chewed and spat. Judge Bates paid his bill, lifted a chubby hand in farewell, and he and his partner went outside. With the jurist setting the pace, they went to the livery-barn and saddled their mules. Tobacco pulled his latigo tight with, "Bates, I'd sure cotton to know your mind, if you have such an animal, which sometimes I doubt."

"Sometimes, friend, I have similar doubts. But we are going to Mill Iron, for there should be answers there to the two telegrams we sent yesterday."

"But why tell Jefferson and Pelican we are leaving?"

"We are doing just that. After the inquest this afternoon, to all intents and purposes you and I shall have departed from Willow Brook. But, in reality, we will be in hiding, back in that cabin of Muskrat Pelton's, where we came from when we found Frenchy."

"Why?"

"So we can work on the quiet. With us gone, suspicions of Jefferson and Pelican will be soothed over; they will think they have the field entirely to themselves. Did you notice the measurements of the two knife holes in LaFevre's back? One knife was broader than the other. Also, the bottom holes in the mackinaw and the shirt did not jibe."

Tobacco found his stirrup. "I noticed that, too. That means that Frenchy LaFevre had been knifed, and was dead, before Muskrat's skinnin' knife was plunged into him. And he had his shirt off when the blade went into him. Therefore those holes were wrong in the shirt and mackinaw. They'd been put in later, huh, to make it look like he'd been knifed through his coat and shirt?"

"That's right, Tobacco."

Tobacco bit off a chew. "But Bates, where—? Why didn't he have his shirt and coat on?"

"I figure he was goin' to bed. Somebody come up behind him and sunk a knife in his back."

"But why did they kill him? And who did it? I can see why they lugged him over to Muskrat's cabin; they wanted to lay his murder on ol' Muskrat. An' this danged two-bit sheriff? How come he was there at the cabin?"

"Maybe the sheriff killed him?"

"That could be."

THE WIND was down but it was still around zero. They loped their mules down the wagon-road that had its snow packed and hard by the runners of bobsleds. At the depot two telegrams awaited them. The judge read them first, then handed them to Tobacco, who read slowly, lips moving.

"You read it, Bates."

"Hell of a postmaster you are," grumbled the judge. "Can hardly read a line. Here's the first one."

Judge Lemanuel Bates,
Mill Iron, Wyoming.

Answer recent telegram. One government game-warden on Willow Brook job. Name is Olive Wilkins but works job under alias of Frenchy LaFevre.

Matthew Martin
Head Game Warden.
St. Louis, Mo.

Tobacco breathed, "Oh-oh. Now the other."

Judge Lemanuel Bates,
Mill Iron, Wyoming.

Answer yesterday's telegram, Lem, regarding man named Pelican. Real name William S. Smith Alias John Rudder alias Will Smythe Alias Pelican. Shady character but no direct charge to incur arrest. If charge is found, cause arrest immediately and wire me. I'll fix him.

Your friend,
Howard Sibley,
Bureau of Criminal Records.

"We better wire Mr. Martin that Frenchy LaFevre is dead," said Tobacco Jones. "Now we know why he was killed, huh? They got suspicious of him an' bounced a meat jabber into his spine!"

"But we don't know who did it." The judge was in deep thought. "But I got a hunch we'll find out. No, I'm not notifying Matthew Martin about Frenchy's murder. Martin might get the idea of sending a man out here and that might ball up our game. When this is over, we'll notify him."

"One thing gets me, Bates. Or maybe I should have said two things First, we don't know how these furs are getting to St. Louis an' second, we ain't got no concrete evidence that Jefferson an' Pelican are trapping them. So far, all we have is suspicions; not evidence to hold up in court."

"I've been thinking about that, too. Another thing puzzles me and it is this: How do two men get so many pelts? They must have some way besides steel traps to catch beaver—some faster way?"

The judge sent another telegram to St. Louis. He read it aloud to Tobacco.

Dear Martin:
Telegram arrived. Today carload of sheep-pelts shipped by Jefferson and Pelican out of Willow Brook. Intercept car and wire findings to me. Playing hunch.

Judge Lemanuel Bates.

The telegrapher sent the message off and Judge Bates and Tobacco ate dinner and got into saddle again. They loped toward Willow Brook, each busy with his thoughts. The two telegrams had cleared up much.

"We leave. See, Tobacco? We move out to that line-camp of Muskrat's. Judge Simpson will keep Muskrat and Limpy in jail until this is settled. From that camp, we work out and watch in secret."

"Good idea, Bates."

Their mules stuck doggedly to the trail, loping in short jumps. And Judge Bates cursed their wicked, choppy gaits. Last time, he swore, he'd ever ride a mule. A bronc for him, after this.

"A rockin' chair for me," Tobacco assured.

Judge Bates slung his jug around, got it balanced on his forearm, and drank deeply. He corked it and looped the buckskin thong around his sad-

dle-horn where the jug bounced with each jump of his mule.

"Sometimes, Tobacco, I wish you would drink with me. It makes a man feel out of sorts when his best partner will not drink from his jug. It gives him a lonesome feeling."

"Much better you feel lonesome," grumbled Tobacco, "then I take the drink. 'Cause then I'd feel a big, hard headache!"

14

MILT JEFFERSON sat sprawled in his chair, legs extended toward the hot stove. Across the room Pelican sat and looked at his fingernails.

Jefferson said, "Well, that's luck Bates and Jones pullin' out that-away on us. I'll feel better with them off'n this range."

Pelican nodded.

Jefferson looked at the long-necked man. "You don't seem too happy, friend. Buck up, Pelican. You never stuck that knife in Frenchy LaFevre's back. I did it, not you."

Pelican was silent.

Jefferson took a drink from the quart at his elbow. "We did that pretty slick, huh? Took the carcass ove to Muskrat's cabin and then Sheriff Webster buried the knife—Muskrat's knife—in LaFevre's back. That's what the dirty crook gets for tryin' to worm into our confidence! And then we find identification on him saying he is a federal game-warden!"

Pelican spoke in a dry voice. "Our suspicions were correct, for once." He was in a dark, slow mood, and this showed on his ugly, thin face. "But I am wondering if Bates and Jones are really leaving. Does it seem logical they would run out on Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes?"

They were in their town-office, a small log building set in an alley. They had two bunks hung from chains on the walls. They used this for night quarters when they happened to be in town.

"I've been wonderin' about that, too?"

Pelican looked at his boots. "Well, when the coroner's inquest considers the evidence, they should charge Muskrat with murder. Unless somebody goes his bail, he'll stay in jail until spring term of court. But what about Limpy Rhodes?"

"They should clear him. Muskrat's knife was in LaFevre, not Limpy's." He grinned. "But it's good we have Limpy out. Otherwise, if further suspicion rises about the beaver pelts—Who would there be to blame it on if both Limpy and Muskrat were behind bars?"

Pelican pulled his bottom lip in thought. "Milt, let's make one more beaver drive, then quit for the year. This is a powder-keg we're settin' on, fella. One more drive, in a few nights?"

"All right. One more drive."

"Somebody comin'," murmured Pelican.

The man entered without knocking. Once inside, he ran to the small window, moved against the wall, glancing out the corner of the glass. "Guess nobody saw me come in," he said.

"You're gettin' locoer every day!" Milt Jefferson snapped his words. "Sheriff, what if somebody did see you come into my office? What would be wrong with that? One of our employees—a trusted employee—has been murdered. You come to check with me on facts that might point to his murderer. You're only carryin' out your job, ain't you? You act like a cottontail jumped out the brush by a pack of coyoties."

"You forgot," admonished the Pelican, "that you told Bates you had fired Frenchy yesterday morning. Don't get things tangled up on the witness box during the inquest, Jefferson."

"Look, Jefferson?" Sheriff Ed Webster's slack lips were shaking. "What if things reflect back on us? What if the government sends out a man to investigate LaFevre's murder? They will send out a man, I tell you. What if they catch us trappin' beaver?"

"They won't."

"Why?"

"We won't be trappin' beaver then. We make one more drive and that's the end until next year—or until this stink blows over."

Relief penciled its way across Webster's craggy face. He rubbed the water from his eyes. "Man, I'm glad to hear that— When I think of my girl, an' if somethin' went wrong— When do we make that drive, Milt?"

Jefferson drummed his fingers on the desk. "Not tonight, Ed. Tomorrow night. The moon will be right, then. We got the spot picked out, and the dogs are in good shape. They need action."

"Wonder if Bates knows about them dogs?" Webster amused.

Jefferson sent him a quick glance. "What if he did know? Is it against the law to have dogs on a sheep-ranch?"

"Nah, not that, Milt. But them dogs are so odd—their legs so short, an' they cain't run fast. He might think it funny that a sheep-ranch have them kind of dogs, 'stead of coyotie hounds."

"Your imagination ain't asleep" Pelican said.

"Nah, don't get me wrong. But little things like that is what trips up crooks. Me, I've read up a lot on catchin' crooks, an' from what I've read it's the little things, the insignificant things, what catches them sometimes."

"Sometimes, sure."

Milt Jefferson asked, "Where are Bates an' Jones now Webster?"

"They went into the livery barn. Reckon they're down there curryin' them mules of theirs. Figure I'll ramble down that-a-way an' glance in on them. All right, we got everything worked out for what we should each one say on the witness stand this afternoon? Let's talk that over a bit. huh?"

AN HOUR LATER, Sheriff Ed Webster went to the barn. Timothy O' Rourke had a bottle and his eyes were seeing things in a mirage-like fog. Judge Bates, he said, had given him the bottle.

Where was Judge Bates and Tobacco Jones now?

The old holster lifted the bottle again. Bates, he said, was a gentleman, and now he was leaving town. He, Timothy O'Rourke, had no luck at all. Here he met up with a gentleman, a fine son of Erin, and he was liberal with his whisky, and now he was ready to leave Willow Brook.

He eyed Sheriff Ed Webster belligerently? Had he, the Sheriff of Willow Brook county, ever given him, Timothy O'Rourke, a drink, or even the smell of a bottle, for taking such good care of his bronc? No, he hadn't.

"But where did Bates an' Jones go?"

"Why do you wanta know, Webster? They ain't no f r i e n d s of your'n. They're too fine a gentlemen to associate with scum like you!"

Webster grinned a little. The old man was drunk, but still the words hurt him. "I'm just actin' in my legal capacity, Timothy. They have to be at the inquest and it will start in a few hours. I want to make sure they're in town on time."

Timothy considered that and hiccoughed. "They went out toward Muskrat's cabin." He had no idea where Judge Bates and Tobacco had gone. "Seen 'em ride that way with my own eyes, tightwad."

"I don't like your words!"

"Don't like 'em then! You're the tightiest, meanest hombre I've ever curried a bronc for! I oughta beat the daylights outa you—"

Sheriff Ed Webster left the old man muttering curses at him. Despite the cold, his face was red. He found himself looking at the hills to the south. A man could ride over them and disappear. He'd be free then; free of J e f f e r s o n and Pelican. But he wouldn't be free of his thoughts, his fears.

Webster groaned inwardly. He was, at heart, a coward; he knew this, he accepted it. But he had sense enough to know that this bubble might burst

any minute. He didn't want to end up in his own jail.

He kept looking at the snow-covered hills. Then and there he made himself a promise. Jefferson and Pelican paid him a hundred dollars for each time he helped them bait the beaver dens. He hadn't figured on helping them this time, for he had been afraid.

Now he realized he needed that hundred. He'd work with them, get his pay. Tomorrow was payday from the county. He'd have one-hundred and twenty dollars there, a hundred from Jefferson. He'd pull out on a strong, fast horse. Drift south. To hell with Jefferson and Pelican. When a man murdered a federal man, he was facing a tough outfit. Old Uncle Sam didn't give up. He knew, deep inside of him, that Jefferson had erred when he had knifed Frenchy as the man was getting into bed.

Yes, he'd drift. He was sure of that, now. His mind was made up. He'd get a job punching cows somewhere and send his wages to his daughter. He felt a terrible, pulling pain as he thought of his girl. He was lonely for her. He wanted to curse fate for what it had done to her, to him. But he knew that Fate had not brought him to his present circumstance. He himself, through his weakness, had brought his predicament about.

HE WENT BACK to Jefferson and Pelican told them Bates and Jones had ridden out to Muskrat's cabin. Jefferson ran his thumb along his clean-shaven jaw, rolling with this information, and Pelican sat still in his chair, face without emotion.

Sheriff Ed Webster watched him.

Jefferson finally said, "I see no danger in that. What do you say, Pelican?"

"Nothing dangerous, I'd say."

"We're havin' grub sent over from Mabel Pelton's cafe," said Jefferson. "Sit around and when the cook comes with the orders, we'll send him back for another plate full, Ed."

Webster reminded them it might be best if he were not seen to often with them. He left and went to his office. Judge Simpson was seated at his desk as the sheriff went down the corridor, boots ringing on the floor, said, "Good mornin', Judge."

"And how are you, sheriff?"

"Fine thanks." Webster stopped. "Reckon the coroner's goin have that inquest at three, huh?"

"We'll have it then, sir."

"Has he got his jury picked?"

"No, he is selecting its members now."

Webster squinted hard. "Needs six men, don't he? Been a long time since we had a coroner's inquest, ain't it? Me, I cain't remember the last time."

"Just three years ago, when that bronc killed young Jackie Hogan."

"Oh, yeah, I remember."

"Wonder if the mail is in yet?"

"Ah, shucks, I forgot to go into the postoffice. I'll go down there right now, Judge."

"No, I'll go."

"Nope, Judge, you take it easy. I'll go. That's part of my job."

Webster looked the mail over in the postoffice. He saw nothing in Judge Emil Simpson's mail that would cause suspicion: some ads and a few personal letters, all from people that he and Simpson knew. He tossed the whole caboodle on Simpson's desk.

"No red tape today, Judge."

Webster went to his office. The boy came over from Mabel Pelton's cafe with dinner for Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton. Webster lifted the cloth and carefully looked at the food. He opened the long buns and saw they were filled with butter.

"Thought maybe Mabel was smugglin' in two short files in them buns, huh?"

Webster snapped, "My job demands precautions, sir!"

He went with the boy back to the cells. He opened the trapdoors and slid the food through. "Eat hearty, men."

"We'll be eatin' good grub when you're dead," growled Limpy Rhodes.

"Is there a threat in that?"

Muskrat Pelton answered. "Read what you want into it, flat-forehead. Now get your carcass outa here cause I wanna eat good food without a stink aroun' me!"

The boy snickered.

"Come back later for the trays," snapped Webster. "Don't stand aroun' here like a schoolgirl!"

The boy left.

Webster turned and left, too. Behind him, he heard Limpy and Muskrat jeer him. He went outside. He headed toward Mabel Pelton's cafe, the only beanery in town. He didn't feel too good.

Well, there was always tomorrow. And he hoped things would look better by then. He found a stool. Mabel Pelton was waiting table. But she sent the cook to wait on him.

"What'd you want, Webster? Spit your order out pronto, 'cause I'm busier'n hell. Spill it sheriff!"

"Bean soup," Webster said. "And put some spuds and a large steak in with it. Coffee, too."

15

AFTER THE inquest was over, Judge Lemanuel Bates and Tobacco Jones went back to visit Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes. When the two old trappers saw the pair coming, their eyes lit up.

"Yippee, we got freed, Muskrat!"

"Turn us loose, Bates!"

But Judge Bates had no humor in him; he shook his heavy head sadly. "Sorry, men, but both of you are to be held over for superior court, which convenes in April. Both of you were found suspected of murder by the coroner's jury. Judge Simpson sent us to tell you the verdict."

Muskrat Pelton sat down on the cot, face pale under its brushy whiskers. Limpy Rhodes stared at them, mouth open. He looked like somebody had rammed a pin into him and it hurt so much he couldn't holler.

"Me, too?" gulped Limpy.

Again Judge Lem Bates shook his head dolefully. "Yes, you also, Limpy. The jury based that assumption on the fact that sometimes you also used that knife, and that Frenchy LaFevre was found in a cabin that was also yours, along with Muskrat!"

Limpy glared at Muskrat. "You said that on the stand, you ol' misfit! Your big mouth got me in trouble, too!"

Muskrat moaned, "Please, Limpy, don't pick on me! Limpy, I'm a sick man—a sick, sick man—"

Limpy came down to earth. "But who'll take care of our trap lines, Bates? We can't afford to lose our peltry."

"We'll talk with your two trappers," assured the jurist. "We'll ride out and see them before we go—"

"Before you go?" asked Muskrat, eyes wide. "You surely ain't pullin' out an' leavin' us, are you, Bates?"

"We got to go, friends."

"Friends! A fine hog-swoggin' friend you are, Judge! An' you too, Jones! Why cain't we get freed on bail?"

"Jury recommended you stay confined."

Limpy's tone was sharp. "So you two are pullin' out on us, huh? Well, good riddance, I say. A man's your friend if he'll sacrifice an' help you. You ain't needed back in Cowtrail. You done told us that when you come."

"But we got a telegram saying the postoffice had burned down. Tobacco has to get back immediately. As a federal judge, I have to witness the ashes and make a federal report, for the postoffice was a government office."

"That true, Tobacco?" queried Muskrat.

"Plumb true, friend."

"We'll be back for your trials," the jurist promised.

Muskrat's seamed eyes held a lazy look. "Seems odd, that jury not givin' us right to bail. Real odd. Never had heard of that before—What'd you say, Bates? You mean we won't see you until court convenes?"

"That's right."

The judge and Tobacco left. Sheriff Ed Webster was at his desk, scrawling on paper with a squeaky

pen . He got to his feet and shook hands with them. "Well, men, sure hate to see you go. We've had our little tiffs but I reckon they're all forgot by now, huh?"

"That's right, sir."

THEY WENT outside. Tobacco Jones said, "Good gravy, I didn't know we'd have to kiss that louse goodbye. Now all we need is Milt Jefferson an' Pelican to bid us a fond adieu. Hades, there they come outa the Ace Down!"

"An' right toward us, Tobacco."

"Sorry you are leaving Willow Brook," said Milt Jefferson. "We trust you will come back again, gentlemen, when the climate is more favorable and when there is less excitement."

"Might come back sometime and go fishing," grumbled the judge. He and Tobacco continued toward the barn. "I sure wouldn't shake hands with him or Pelican. All I could keep from hitting either of them, sir."

"Wouldn't mind tanglin' with one or both of them myself. We got plenty of shotgun ca'tridges, ain't we?"

"Yes, sir. And my jug is full. And your tobacco stock?"

Tobacco assured that he had six extra plugs of Horse Shoe in his saddle-bags. Old Timothy O'Rourke sat on the bench in his office, fire heaped in the coal-burner. His eyes had more specks of red than they should have and his breath would have pickled a raw cucumber.

"Bates, you ain't really goin', be you?"

"Duty calls, my good man, and I must answer. Surely you haven't disposed of that bottle already?"

"Nah, got a mite left."

Judge Bates handed him his jug and advised him to drink deeply. "For it is probably the last time you drink on Judge Lemanuel Bates. When you have finished, hit your bunk and sleep."

But Timothy O'Rourke followed them back to where their mules ate hay. He tried to help the judge saddle his mule. He tripped over a manure fork leaning against the stall. He sat down.

"Now how'd that fork get tangled up with me?"

Tobacco had to smile.

"Darned thing ran right across the corridor," said the judge. "Just ran across there and tripped you, Timothy."

Timothy O'Rourke regarded him with owlish eyes. "A manure-fork cain't run, Bates. You must be drunker than I am." He got shakily to his feet and sat on the edge of the manger. The judge slipped his bridle on his mule. He saw to it his elbow gave the hostler a push.

Timothy O'Rourke did not open his eyes. He slid down into the manger, sitting in it in a jacknife-position, back against the wall, long legs hooked over the manger at the knees. He snored and sighed.

"Old drunk," growled Tobacco. "Look good at him, Judge Bates! Someday mayhap you will find yourself in a similar position."

"I'm too fat to get into that manger, Tobacco."

This time they rode openly out the front door of the livery-stable. Their mules were tired from the long ride over to Mill Iron and back but it was only a few miles to the cabin in the hills. They rode south and they saw that Milt Jefferson and Pelican stood in the window of the Ace Down and watched them leave.

They left the town and they climbed the slope, mules pulling up the hill. Tobacco was silent and the judge played with errant thoughts. His weight would have caused his saddle to slide back on the mule's rump, had it not been for the martingale. Both of the partners had martingales and breeching-straps on their saddles. The martingale kept the saddle from sliding back when a mule climbed a steep grade; the breeching-strap kept it from sliding ahead, when the mules went down a steep slant.

Had they been riding horses, neither of these would have been necessary. But a mule hasn't the barrel a bronc has, and the cinch slides back and forth easier. A mule has lower wethers, too, and a level back with

not much rump. A saddle can slide back on his rump easier than it can on bronc.

THE JUDGE paid no attention to the tension on his martingale. He and Tobacco were playing long odds. He hated to see Muskrat Pelton and Limpy Rhodes stay in jail for jail, in his consideration, was only for criminals. And these two were definitely not in that category.

"Funny thing, Tobacco. Some men are locked in jail to protect the taxpayers and citizens on the outside. Now we have locked Muskrat and Limpy in jail to protect them *from* the taxpayers."

"Yeah, if you can consider Jefferson an' Pelican as taxpayers." He chewed and frowned. "Bates, I'd like to know how deep Sheriff Ed Webster is in pie? Has he sunk so deep the slime is runnin' into his pockets?"

"Higher than that, I'd say. I'd say it is running in his collar."

Tobacco got rid of a chew. "Yeah, an' I heard tell back yonder he's got a sick girl." He twisted in leather and looked at his companion. "Bates, that sheriff is a weak character. He's crazy about his girl, they tell me. He'd do anything for her. Judge, he'd break, I figure."

"Under pressure, yes. I am sure he would." Judge Bates spread his hands in an empty gesture. "But, friend, where are we going to get the pressure to put him? Can you answer that?"

"We ain't got it."

"Here comes a bobsled."

Evidently the sled held a farmer and his wife. Judge Bates had heard there were some nesters south of town. They waved, as range-folks will do, but the judge and Tobacco did not stop to talk. The bobsled went over the hill and out of sight. Judge Bates swung his mule off the trail.

"Reckon we've ridden south far enough to make people believe we are really leaving the country. That man and woman in that bobsled will tell Jefferson and Pelican they met us and you can bet Jefferson and his partner will ask them. Now we swing north-west, huh?"

"Right, Judge."

The dusk was turning to darkness. Tobacco jogged along, overshoes loose in stirrups, but the judge stood on his stirrup-leathers, mittens braced on his fork. One thing kept puzzling him and he could not find an answer to it.

How did Jefferson and Pelican get hold of so many beaver pelts in such a short time? Surely not by using steel traps. Beavers were wary creatures. One of them get caught in a trap at the entrance to the den and the others will quickly see it. Instead of going out the entrance, they will dig another one.

And they will dig it so deep in the water that a man, reaching through a hole chopped in the ice, cannot reach it even if he immerses his whole arm in water. Therefore he cannot put a trap in it. Of course, he can take a chance and weight a trap with a rock, and sink it down where he thinks the hole is. But that is of little avail. For usually the beaver does not dig his hole to come out on the floor of the stream. And the weighted trap, of course, sinks to the bottom.

And how were they getting the pelts to market? He had checked and double-checked this in his mind, and found his figuring was awry. He kept remembering that load of sheep pelts that had gone out that morning. Had they shipped beaver with the sheep hides?

The more the judge puzzled with that thought, the more he became convinced that this might be the way they got beaver out of Willow Brook. For a sheep is skinned "flat"—the hide is split down the belly and then spread out, flesh side up, to dry. And a beaver is skinned the same way. His hide is stretched on a circular stretcher with the flesh-side exposed to the air to cure it.

A sheephide is bigger in circumference than a beaver pelt. They are stacked in a boxcar. And a man could insert a beaver hide between two sheepskins and the edges of the pelt would not show.

The sheep-hides would go to a tan-

nery for processing into leather to be used in sheepskin coats and for gloves. And if a man had somebody on the other end of the line, somebody who had an outlet for illegally-trapped beaver— Judge Bates groaned aloud.

TOBACCO looked at him sharply. "Somethin' you et that hurts you, Bates?"

"I wished we could've got a look-see into that boxcar they shipped sheep-hides in. You see what I'm thinking, don't you?"

"I follow you, Bates. Only we never got to look into it. But that wire you sent to St. Louis will cause it to be opened and inspected."

"But those mutton-head government men! Just a bunch of young know-alls, just out of college, filled with schooling and lacking the balance a man gets by life's education. Sometimes, Tobacco, I despair."

"Despair of what, friends?"

"Our higher education system! Sometimes I think the colleges today graduate educated fools, total nincompoops."

"Talked with your old grandpappy once," Tobacco volunteered. "That was years ago, of course, 'cause the ol' gent's been dead for years. An' he told me just what you're saying. He claimed our schools turned out a bunch of boobs. He pointed you as a livin' example."

Judge Bates had to smile.

"But I'm no college graduate. I worked my way the hard way—starting as an apprenctice in a law office, studying my books by night. I taught myself all I know."

"Yonder's the cabin." Tobacco waved his arm toward the north. "Bates, I only got one thing to say. You had a poor teacher!"

16

THE NESTER was tying his team to the hitchrack in front of the Mercantile store. Milt Jefferson stopped and talked with him. They talked for a few minutes, and then Jefferson went into the Ace Down saloon. He went to the bar beside Pelican.

"They're gone, all right."

"Of course they're gone. They went south. Cowtrail's south. What makes you think they ain't goin' to Cowtrail?"

"They're two smart gents. But I was talkin' to that farmer that's situated on Lime Crick, on Alkali Flats. He met them some six miles out, he said, an' they were driftin' south."

"Take a drink?"

Jefferson shook his head. He said, "I'm going back to the cabin." He went out the back door. He unlocked the door to the cabin and was stoking the fire when Sheriff Ed Webster entered.

"Where's Pelican?"

"In the Ace Down. Why?"

Webster shrugged. "Just asked, that's all. Well, it worked out purty good, didn't it, Milt?"

Jefferson put the poker in the coal bin and slammed the door shut on the stove. "I don't know for sure, Ed. Dang it, why did Judge Emil Simpson hold Limpy Rhodes? I sort've wanted him out an' trappin' in the hills. Who can the blame fall on now that they're both in jail?"

"They have two trappers out."

"Yeah, but where are they? Way back in the badlands. Hades, they never even heard about Limpy an' Muskrat's troubles. They never even got in for the trial."

Sheriff Webster rubbed his watery eyes. I was sorta su'prised too, when the judge put Limpy in jail for spring trail. And he didn't give them chance to raise bail, either. Me, I figured that maybe Bates an' Jones would go their bail, but the judge recommended no bail be held."

Overshoes sounded outside. Sheriff Ed Webster turned, hand on his gun. Pelican entered, kicking snow off his overshoes. He looked at Webster's hand on his gun and his eyes were as blue as the ice on the rimrock.

"You're tetchy, Webster."

"You shouldn't sneak up that-a way on a man." Webster pulled his hand back. Pelican did not get out

of his mackinaw; neither did Milt Jefferson. Webster noticed this. "You men ridin'?"

Jefferson told him they were heading for the ranch. Later on, the moon would be up; should hit the eastern rim of the hills about eight. Tomorrow, he said, would be the night. What time would Webster be out at the ranch?

"About eight, I reckon."

"Make it seven-thirty, Ed." Pelican grinned lazily, enjoying the heat from the stove. This would be their last raid of the season. They were going to hit the prime spot, the place where there were plenty of beaver, big beaver. They'd made a good stake. They'd let the pelts dry good and ship them out. With Jones and Bates gone, the danger was gone.

"But we don't know where them pelts are goin', when they hit the east." Webster studied the two men closely. "How do we know them men that collect them in St. Louis won't slip an' the law close in on us?"

"You don't know that bunch," Milt stated. "If you did, Ed you'd never make that statement. They know more about the law and the lawmen than the cops know about themselves."

"Buck up," Pelican encouraged. "You ain't dead yet, Ed."

"I'l be there, tomorrow. At seven-thirty. An' without bells!" Webster laughed at what he considered a joke.

They talked for a while longer. Pelican and Jefferson seemed in no hurry to get to their ranch. Frankly, it made no difference what time they got there; the hired hands tended to the chores. Of course, they could flesh a few beaver pelts.

WEBSTER WENT to his room. Dusk was thick when the two sheepman rode out of the barn. Timothey O'Rourke had rolled to one side; now he slept in the manger. Jefferson had grinned and gestured to Pelican, who came close and looked at the drunken hostler.

Jefferson dipped a bucket of oats out of the bin. He got O'Rourke around and Pelican held the old timer's collar open in the back. Jefferson poured the oats down the inside of the collar along the old man's back.

O'Rourke's lips moved a little to say, "Danged flies, in the winter time, too. Get inside a man's collar.." He mumbled a little more and fell to breathing. Jefferson looked at Pelican and grinned and Pelican smiled widely.

They had saddled and ridden out of Willow Brook. From the ridge they could see the yellow kerosene lamps in the windows below. Jefferson noticed lamplight in the window of the cell occupied by Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton.

"Wonder if anybody's got word out to Muskrat's two trappers that Muskrat an' Limpsy's in the clink?"

Pelican shrugged. "Don't know who it would be, huh?"

"We'll work their trap lines, come mornin'. I hear that Muskrat's been takin' quite a few mink outa his traps."

"Yeah, it'll give us somethin' to do."

Pelican's thin face was a study of conflicting thoughts. He rode bent in saddle, and the years, suddenly, were heavy on him. They were heavy and unyielding and they fitted around his shoulders, putting an unseen weight on him. He looked at the scraggly sagebrush, peeping out of the snow, and he looked at the snowy mountains to the north. The moon, slanting across the cold rim of the world, showed on the mountain peaks, its yellow light refracting from the snow.

"I wonder," he spoke softly, "how the beach is, down in Rio? I can see that horseshoe of white, warm sand."

Jefferson looked at him.

Pelican went on. "Look at yonder range of mountains, friend? Snow on them now, snow on the Fourth of July. Milt you know what I'm thinkin'?"

"I think so. But go on."

Pelican screwed his long neck around and looked levelly at Jefferson. "Milt, we're through here. Done. Finished. When we got rid of that federal man, we misplayed an ace. The gover'ment will send men in to

investigate. "What if Muskrat Pelton does get the blame? Milt, look at this snow, feel this cold!"

Jefferson rode deep in saddle.

"And down in Rio, or Mexico City ...warm wind now, Milt." Pelican pounded his saddle-fork with his mittened hand. "Smell that air, Milt? What's that stink in it? Sheep!"

The wind whipped in, driving snow against them; their broncs put heads down, and plodded on. The moonlight was golden and bright across the wilderness now. The wind spent its foolish sudden force; it dropped and the range was clear again.

Jefferson said, "All right, Pelican, all right. I'm sick of it, too. We've made dinero in these two years—we've taken out around twenty thousand apiece. Maybe we could make as much in a few minutes, robbin' some bank—but here we haven't had to dodge lead, so far, anyway."

"One more raid. Tomorrow night, Milt?"

Jefferson nodded. "That's it. I'll leave a will; we'll make it out tonight. You have no relatives, have you?"

"None that I'd want to help. Got a few I'd like to hit over the head with a bent horseshoe." Pelican sported a twisted smile.

"I got a nephew, up in Montana. He's worked hard to get a cow-outfit started, but he had to start from scratch. We'll leave these sheep for him. Then, when this bunch is in market, we pull stakes. We just disappear."

"We got another carload of hides ready. We ship it in two days. Ship these beaver pelts wet in the hides. We'll salt the beaver good before putting it between the sheep pelts."

"I'll start men haulin' pelts in, tomorrow."

They rode on, horses plodding.

JEFFERSON spoke again. "But how was I to know he was a gover'ment man? We went through his war-bag an' personal belongin's, an' found some phoney letters that told us he was wanted by the law in Arizona. Yet we find his gover'ment credentials sewed inside the left leg of his underwear..."

"Forget it, Milt."

They came to a divide and below them a light looked blurred as it shone through the canvas of a sheep-wagon. The wagon was below them on a small flat and they could see the sheep bunched for protection from the wind. The herder, a small man bundled in muffler and a long overcoat, called to them as they rode by.

"Who goes there?"

They rode up to him. Jefferson said, "You got a cold job, Shorty. You got plenty of chuck an' fuel?"

The man needed some coal, he said. Jefferson promised to send a load out with a wagon come morning. Coyotes were bad, Shorty said; he and his dogs were making a round of the sheep, seeing that coyotes didn't get any. He cursed the coyotes and the cold.

Yes, he had some weak sheep. But there was some feed here, for the wind had whipped the snow off the ridges, piling it in drifts against the sandstones. He waved his arms, slapping them against him, to keep up circulation. He wondered how cold it was. His thermometer had fallen from its hook and broken.

"Mercury sure went down," he said.

"About twenty below," Jefferson guessed.

"Be sure an' send out some lignite."

They rode into the Box ranch and came down in the barn. They unstripped their horses and hung up their saddles and put blankets on their sweaty cayuses. The wind was up again and the still air of the barn felt good.

Jefferson said, "I'm gettin' old, I guess. I feel for a good clean bed in a warm room. No more night-rides for me, if I can help."

"For people with little brains."

Their cook had supper ready. He grumbled and said he'd had a hard time keeping things warm because he had made supper for the usual time. He hoped it was still worth chewing on.

The meal finished, Jefferson got

the weekly paper and read about LaFevre's passing. He learned nothing from it; in fact, he could have told the editor a fact or two, still unknown, about, LaFevre's death. He skimmed through the market quotations on sheep and sheepskins, and looked at the fur prices as posted by a Denver fur-house. Mink, he saw, drew a good price.

Pelican said, "Me for the sougans," and went to his room.

Jefferson sat with his legs extended toward the fire in the fireplace. The heat crept up his legs and felt warm and satisfying. The cook came in and sat in the other chair. He asked about the coroner's inquest. Jefferson told him about Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton being held in jail on a murder charge.

"That'll be tough on Mabel."

Jefferson thought of Mabel, too. He like the girl, too. She was clean and pretty, and she thought heaps of old Muskrat. She didn't know what was going on on this snow-covered range, and yet what she didn't know was affecting her life.

He went to the secretary and got some paper and a pen. Putting the tablet on the arm of the chair, he wrote a crude will. He wrote slowly and when the document was finished, he had the cook sign it.

"Below my signature, there."

"What is this, Milt?"

"What t'hell difference does it make? Sign your right name, too."

The pen scratched, blotted, kept on scratching. Jefferson looked at the signature and decided he would get Pelican to sign as the other witness in the morning. The cook wrote a wobbly hand, he decided.

"You didn't sign your full name," he joked, "You only put one X."

"Shoulda put two X's, huh, Milt?"

17

JUDGE LEMANUEL Bates and Tobacco Jones put their mules into the lean-to barn built on the west side of the cabin. Some blue-joint hay was in bales against the far wall and one bale had already been opened. They filled the manger with the sweet-smelling hay and their mules fell to, jaws grinding in the dark. They loosened cinches and left their saddles on the animals.

"Never know when we'll need them right pronto," the judge stated.

They went into the cabin. They did not light a lamp. They started a fire in the stove with pine-knots from the wood-box and when these were going, they put lignite on the coals. They banked the fire good and went to bed in the two bunks. Gradually warmth crept through the cabin.

Out in the lean-to, the mules moved now and then. Judge Bates figured some of the heat from the cabin would also warm the lean-to to some degree. Outside it was steadily getting colder. The jurist was thankful for the stout walls and the lignite in the stove. His voice sounded hollow in the dark.

"God is good to us poor mortals, Tobacco. When the elements rage outside, we are warm because he made stout pine trees to fell and build into a good shelter, because eras ago he caused giant forests to fall and be covered with earth, thereby making good coal to keep us warm."

"Wonder why he made snakes like Jefferson an' Pelican, Bates?"

"He never made them into snakes. You may be assured they completed that metamorphic change by themselves, letting their weakness change them to what they are." He decided to get in a dig at his partner. "You have the vile habit of chewing tobacco. Besides being injurious to your frail health—"

"Frail! Bates, what're you gabbin' about? Me, *frail?* Sure, I'm tall an' skinny, but do you want to test backs with me?"

Judge Bates smiled in the darkness "You sound like Limpy and Muskrat, friend. A test of mere physical strength is a sign that a man is of such low intelligence?"

"Well, I ain't had no education, like you have. But I've seen things I've thought through that you couldn't think through."

"Like what for instance?"

"Well, I — Well . . . Ah, shut up, Bates! I come to bed to sleep, not to

argue. Shut up, an' good night!"

Soon Tobacco was snoring.

Outside the wind played in the pine-eaves. On the ridge the pine and spruce sang in the wind. Tobacco snored so loudly that Judge Bates could scarcely hear the wind. The judge wished the postmaster would quit. He leaned out of bed and shook him by the shoulder.

"Roll on your side."

Tobacco mumbled and squirmed around. The snoring stopped. Judge Bates tried to shut off his thoughts; he couldn't. How would this end? Were he and Tobacco on a cold track? When could they ride south toward Cowtrail? But what was the use of worrying about it. He pulled the door of his memory shut and made his mind blank. Sleep came then, creeping across him, mumbing him. He remembered dimly that Tobacco started snoring again and he figured the postmaster had gotten on his back again. The next thing he knew, Tobacco was up poking at the fire.

"Daylight, Bates. Rustle outa them sougans, you fire-ball."

The jurist sat up and yawned and stretched. "How come you wake up before me? Did you snore so loud you woke yourself up?"

He had hit on the truth, but Tobacco would be the last to acknowledge it.

"I'm tired, Tobacco."

"You were born tired."

The judge put both feet gingerly to the floor. Not as cold as he had figured. He pulled on his socks, a thick, corpulent man grunting as he bent, his gross body enveloped in long-handled red underwear. Tobacco was whipping some hot-cake batter in a wooden bowl. He had the griddle on the top of the heater.

THE JUDGE WENT out and put some more hay in the manger for the mules. When he came back, he poured a cup of hot coffee and drank it after spiking it with whiskey. Tobacco had hotcakes on the griddle.

"What's on the menu for today, Bates?"

Judge Bates outlined their plan of action. They would leave the cabin and take to the timber. From there they could watch the country. They could watch the Box sheep-ranch and it's buildings and they could watch the men who rode across this range. They would see every move that Milt Jefferson and Pelican made on the open range.

"We might be here for days," grumbled Tobaco. He flipped two hotcakes on Judge Bates' plate. "Then we come back her tonight, huh?"

The judge shook his head. "No, we stay in the brush from now on. For I got a hunch that Jefferson and Pelican make their play in the night. Surely they would not be so foolhardy as to trap beaver in the day time?"

"These moonlight nights are the the right nights," Tobacco admitted. "Hades, but that means cold weather for us an' our critters, Bates!"

"Muskrat's in jail."

"Ol' billy-goat! Our friends sure get us into trouble, Bates! They sure do! When did a friend of ours happen to ever help us?"

"Just do a little thinking and remembering."

Suddenly the lanky postmaster grinned. "I take that back, Bates."

They washed the dishes, checked the dampers on the stove so there would be no danger of fire, and went outside to the lean-to. They led their mules to the creek whre there was some open ripples where the water ran to swiftly to freeze over. They let the beasts drink and then put bits in their mouths. They had warmed the bits over the stove, for a cold bit will take the skin off bronc's tongue and lips.

There was no wind but the thermometer on the cabin showed two below. They got in the pine and rode toward the Box sheep ranch. Judge Bates found himself reviewing what he had learned since coming to Willow Brook.

"That Frenchy LaFevre was a good actor, Tobacco. He tied into Limpy and Muskrat to get himself in good with Jefferson and Pelican, I guess. He sure played his part good, I'd say."

"He had me tricked completely, Bates."

"Which ain't hard," murmured the jurist.

Tobacco studied him sharply. "What say, Bates?"

"I said, 'I'm glad the wind isn't blowin' hard.' Is there something wrong about that statement, friend?"

"Ain't what I figured I'd heard."

"Your ears, like your eyes, are sometimes false to you, as they are to any other man. Look! Yonder comes two riders, and unless my eyes are false to me, they are Milt Jefferson and Pelican, aren't they?"

They had pulled rein in a thick motte of kin-i-kin-ick bushes where the red, scraggly branches hid them from the two riders below, there on the small mesa. Tobacco rubbed his mitten across his long nose and studied the two men with careful eyes.

"Your lamps sure ain't foolin' you, Bates. Sure as shootin' that's Jefferson an' Pelican. Headin' back toward's Muskrat's trappin' grounds, ain't they?"

Judge Bates nodded and was silent.

"Now what the—, Bates?"

"You got me, pard. Only thing we can do is follow them."

THEY LET THE BOX men get a mile or two ahead. Then, high on the ridge, the pines and spruce and firs shielding them and hiding them, they followed on their mules. Judge Lemanuel Bates scowled and took a drink. The warm whiskey heated his blood, he claimed, and made him fight the cold better. Tobacco, though, had other theories.

"Might just be headin' acrost the range," Tobacco allowed.

The pair rode up to the cabin of Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton. Judge Bates was glad they had not gone to the cabin where he and Tobacco had spent the night. For the stove there would still be warm and would tell them humans had spent the night in the shack.

But then logic told him that the Box men would not figure he and Tobacco had spent the night there. They probably were dead sure that the two Cowtrail men had left the Willow Brook section and were now heading south toward Colorado. He heard Jefferson holler, "Hello the house! Anybody home!"

"There won't be no answer," grumbled Tobacco. "Hades, they're jes' makin' danged sure nobody is home. They got somethin' besides their arms up their sleeves, Bates?"

Judge Bates grunted.

Jefferson got down, leaving Pelican mounted. Jefferson pounded on the door and then opened it and went inside the cabin. A few minutes passed and he came out, shutting the door behind him. The partners could hear his words in the thin, cold air.

"Nobody home, Pelican. They're still in the calaboose."

"Where else would they be?"

"A man has to check up, fella. A man has to be sure."

Tobcco glared at them, then looked at Judge Bates. "Judge, ain't that a felony — them goin' into Muskrat's house that-a-way?"

Judge Bates shook his heavy jowls. "No friend, it is nothing illegal. You notice the cabin was not locked; therefore, Jefferson did not force his way into it. Had there been a lock and he forced it, he would have been guilty of burglary or forcible entrance into a locked dwelling. And that is a misdemeanor, not a felony."

"Danged law," grumbled Tobacco. "Made by shyster lawyers and the bankers to protect them an' their holdin's, leavin' us common-folk to hol' the sack for them! I'm goin' run for the legislature next election, believe you me! I'm goin' see that these laws are made right, from here out!"

"Good idea, friend. Excellent idea. Too many people crab and do nothing; constructive. But I am not in the mood, nor the place, to argue whether laws are adequate or inadequate. These two are splitting up, one going to yonder creek, one toward the other. Which hellion do you crave to shadow?"

"I'll take Pelican. I'd like to wrap a log chain aroun' his neck so fast an'

so hard it would cut his bean off when it closed up."

Judge Bates lifted a warning mitten. "None of that stuff, my friend. You must remember not to let indiscretion or your temper get the better of you at this stage of the game. We are out for big stakes. Play your cards close to your belly."

"I'm not that ignorant, Bates."

They decided to wait for a few moments longer and see what the men had in mind. They could watch them for some time from this height, losing them when they got down deeper along the gorges washed by the two small streams. The judge had his fieldglass out and he had it focused on Milt Jefferson.

"Lemme look, Bates."

He handed the glass to Tobacco, who got his high-bridged nose between the lenses. Tobacco slowly turned the focus-screw until the lenses brought Jefferson into view, holding him with strong clarity.

"He's got a sack tied to his saddle. He's got a rifle in his saddle-boot and he packs a gun, strapped around his sheepskin. He's armed for war. Looks to me like he's following old Muskrat's trap line."

"You ought to buy some glasses of you own," the judge said. "You got enough money, haven't you?"

"All right, you old fossil, you look."

It took some moments for the jurist to re-focus the glasses. When he got them correct he saw that Milt Jefferson had left his horse. He had chopped a hole in the ice with his hatchet and now he pulled out a trap with a dead muskrat.

"Robbin' traps, ain't they, Bates?"

Judge Bates nodded.

Tobacco's curses blistered the cold air. "Them dirty, two-bit, bowlegged, knocked-down thieves! They railroad Limpy an' Muskrats behin' bars an' then they've got the unmitigated gall to rob their traps! Bates, that's a felony! I know that, for sure. What say we ride down there an' call their hands?"

Judge Bates lowered the glasses. "Hold in on your hackamore, friend. This is just pin-money these two are picking up today. Just something to keep them busy. We're here for bigger game. We're here to catch them trapping beaver!"

Tobacco bit off a chew, mumbling angrily.

18

ALL DAY THE partners had watched the Box men rob traps belonging to Limpy and Muskrat. And each time either Pelican or Jefferson put a prime plew into his sack, the anger of Tobacco Jones became greater.

Once he almost rode down the slope to challenge Pelican. The man had just taken a marten from a trap — a dark, beautiful-furred wilding — and he had stroked the fine pelt, slow and softly, before putting it in his sack. He busied himself with re-setting the trap.

Tobacco could have come in behind him, gun up. He could have challenged Pelican. But what would the man have done? Would he have gone for his gun for a shoot-out? That would have been all right. But what if he'd s u r r e n d e r e d? Then he would have queered any chance he and Judge Bates had of catching the Box men trapping beaver. Tobacco had growled, bit off a fresh chew, and cursed under his breath.

He kept count of the peltry Pelican collected from the traps. Fourteen muskrats, three mink, two martens and an animal he could not recognize because of the distance. The latter, he decided, must have been a fisher.

One trap had held a bobcat. The big cat had crouched and growled at Pelican, who shot him with his pistol. Evidently the man was a good shot with a Colt, for he killed the bobcat with the first shot, and the 'cat was about thirty feet from him. Pelican tied the bobcat across the back of his saddle, stretching him out with the saddle-strings. His bronc snorted at the scent of fresh blood, the snorts sounding as far as Tobacco, who crouched back in the buckbrush.

Pelican worked down the creek and

met Milt Jefferson. Tobacco got over the ridge, and rode up into the pine trees, carefully keeping himself screened by trees. Judge Lem Bates found him there in the dusk of the cold winter day.

"Had your chuck, Tobacco?"

"Chawed on the pemmican I had in my saddle-bags. Might jus' as well have et a hunk of half-sole off'n an ol' boot. Man, them hellions don't miss a trick, huh? They done robbed them traps slick an' clean. How much you figure they took in peltry outa them?"

The judge came down, dug in his saddle-bag, and came out with a chunk of pemmican. On the trail, they always carried pemmican in their saddle-bags. For one thing, it was light; for another, ounce for ounce it had more nourishment than any other food. A Cheyenne squaw made them some each fall, and in return the judge and Tobacco had always given her the rest of the fat steer they butchered for that purpose. The squaw cut the meat into strips, cured it in some salt brine or some solution only she knew the formula of; then she hung the meat to dry in the fall air. The result was a hard, salty meat that made good chewing although it did make a man drink a little too much water.

Judge Bates filled his mouth with fresh snow and let it melt. "We won't go to the cabin tonight. We watch the Box ranch. The moon will be up early and it will be bright. The wind has died, I guess."

Tobacco listened. The pines were silent. "Thank heaven for small favors. This pemmican sure makes a man thirsty."

Judge Bates reminded him that snow was plentiful. The postmaster jammed snow into his mouth and melted it for drinking water. The dusk deepened and fell rapidly into darkness. They were in the pines above the Box ranch.

Tobacco grabbed the judge's sleeve. "Rider comin' out from Willow Brook, Bates. An' unless my eyes are false to me, he looks like Sheriff Ed Webster."

The judge used his field-glass. "Dark," he murmured, "and hard to see; yeah, that is Webster, partner. Riding right into the yard, too." He lowered his glass, face pulled by many thoughts. "The hounds gather to run in their pack. And speaking of hounds, hear those dogs howl down yonder?"

"Cain't see why Jefferson keeps them dogs, Bates?"

JUDGE BATES hunkered, broad back to a spruce tree. His feet were cold and his legs were cold. He longed for a warm cabin and a hot stove. Down below them lights shone from the Box ranch. They looked dim and indistinct but behind them men sat in warmth and comfort.

"I get home again, Tobacco, and I'll never get ten feet away from the stove, one winter or summer. Yonder slips the moon over the trees. A beautiful sight, friend."

Tobacco studied the yellow moon. "Sure don't look purty to me, Bates. Looks danged cold to me. Be a bright night, huh?"

The judge allowed it surely would be. He dozed a little, numb all over. An hour passed and irritation rubbed like emery-cloth against the jurist. He was a man of action. He wanted to play his cards quickly and play them above-board. This game was slow, too slow. Maybe it might happen tonight, or a week from now — or even a month. He opened his eyes as Tobacco jabbed his elbow in his high ribs.

"Riders leavin' the Box, Bates. Three of them, headin' north. That's Jefferson an' Pelican an' Ed Webster. An' by hades, they got them dogs with them, ain't they?"

The dogs were dark spots scurrying back and forth on the moonlit snow. Judge Bates got to his feet. "Now what in the heck do they want with these curs, friend? Surely they must be riding forth to skulldruggery, but why drag the canines in on it?"

"Don't ask me. We'll foller them an' find out." The postmaster grinned and jerked his shot-gun from it's short saddle-holster. "Look, Bates, a man can even see sights on a shot-

gun — the moonlight is that bright!"

They got in saddles and followed the Box men and the sheriff. They went for about five miles north, and came down on a wide creek. A big beaver dam blocked the stream, evidence of a gigantic beaver colony; this dam widened the creek, for below the dam it ran wild and noisy.

"They're tying their broncs in that brush," murmured Tobacco. "Hades, Bates, they've got shovels, they have. Yes, and some sacks, too. They must have some way of gettin' beaver that we don't savvy."

"That must be it, friend."

The judge noticed that Jefferson had something in his sack. The three left their shovels and regalia lying on the bank and walked out on the beaver dam. Jefferson still carried his sack. The trio stood and talked, pointing out various sections of the dam made of woven sticks, mud and rock.

"Who's crazy here?" Tobacco mumbled. "Me or them? Are my eyes seein' correct, Bates?"

The partners had left their mules high on the ridge. Now they were not more than a hundred yards from the trio who stood on the dam. They had leashed the dogs to trees and the dogs whimpered. It was the whimper of a dog that sounded anxious to get to work at some chore he loved.

"They're just talking about something. Wish we were close enough to hear what they are saying, Tobacco."

Tobacco sent a slow glance along the brush. "Can't get out no closer to them, either. Not enough brush to hide us. Look, they're going over the edge of the dam!"

The trio went out of sight, dipping down over the dam. They were down there for about five minutes. Then they scrambled up the bank and Judge Bates noticed that Jefferson now carried an empty sack. The three men ran back about fifty yards and waited. The roar of an explosion broke up Judge Lemanuel Bates' scowl of wonderment.

The Box men had dynamited the dam. Water roared through the breech, swelling the stream below. The dogs jumped and whimpered. Ed Webster walked through them, quirting them into silence.

Because of the immense hole in the dam the water drained out from under the ice very rapidly. Judge Bates heard the ice crack witha sharp report and sag in, for the support of the water under it was gone, and it was too thin to stand alone. It caved in from the center and then sagged in, the rim ice settling down about ten feet. And when it settled, it esposed the bottom entrances to the beaver dens, dug into the muddy, steep bank.

"Get the dogs," growled Jefferson.

All in all, there were about twenty beaver dens. With six beavers in each one, there were, the judge hurriedly figured, about one hundred and twenty beavers trapped in the dens. But how would Jefferson and his crew get them out?

CROUCHED THERE, the gross jurist forgot the cold weather, his attention on the scene before him. The water under the ice had found its unusual narrow bed, the bed it had occupied before the beavers had built their dam. It was a grotesque, unreal scene. When but a few minutes before had been a smooth expanse of snow-covered ice, there were now icebergs, one laced over the other, piled in wild disorder. And along the banks were the muddy dens of the beaver.

"What're they goin' to do with the dogs?" Tobacco asked, awed.

"You got me, friend."

Their question was not long waiting for an answer. The men led the dogs along the edges of the ice, slipping on the smooth surface. They put a dog into each den. Evidently the dogs had done this many times before and each knew his job. For he pulled and reared against his eash, wanting to crawl into the beaver dens. And with their short legs, they could easily squirm into the muddy entrances.

"So that's why those hounds had such short legs," the jurist murmured. "And mind that cur we saw the day we rode to the Box? Mind the mud around him and how we wondered how he'd gotten muddy?"

"We know now, Bates."

The judge's eyes missed not a trick. This was, he realized, a speedy way to get a prime beaver pelts, and a way to get a bunch of them at one drive. These men had this organized perfectly. Each knew his job and went about it.

He could hear the muffled barks of dogs, deep in the bank. These dogs would keep the beaver from running into the open. But how would they get the beaver out? He noticed that they had dogs in each entrance, now; in fact, some entrances, bigger than others, had two dogs in them.

He could hear them bark, but there wasn't a dog to be seen. They were all in the beaver dens.

"Now what they goin' do, Bates?"

Judge Bates took a drink. "You got me, chum. You know as much about this as I do. The only thing I know is that we got the deadwood on them."

Webster stood beside the entrance to a den, the broad side of his shovel raised. Judge Bates saw that, if a beaver did run past the dog, Webster would hit him with the shovel and kill him the minute he came out of the entrance. Jefferson and Pelican were up on the bank.

Jefferson's words came clearly. "Sounds like the dog is right under here, fellow. Well, let's start diggin'."

Pelican had a pick; he buried its point hard into the frozen earth, pulling up clods. He got through the frozen part and then he and Jefferson dug with shovels. Judge Bates leaned back, the riddle answered.

Tobacco finally said, "I get it . . . now."

"About time, friend."

For the beavers, after digging their entrance in the water, dug up and made the dry part of the den above water-line. Therefore they were close to the surface of the earth and Jefferson and Pelican were digging down to get to the den.

Webster swung his shovel. The partners heard it smack on flesh. "I got one, men," the lawman said. "He got past the dog. Big beaver, too."

"There'll be big ones here," growled Jefferson.

Suddenly Jefferson and Pelican were hitting with the backs of their shovels. They had dug into the den. Beavers were trying to crawl out. There was a fast flurry of action, and the beaver-family had been killed.

"Any come out?" Jefferson asked Webster.

"Two more. I got them both."

"Bring them up," Pelican ordered. "We got to work fast. We got lots of dens to clean out tonight."

Webster came up the bank, sliding once in the mud. He carried the beavers by their broad tails. He helped Jefferson and Pelican pull the beavers out of the den. They laid them in a row, one by one.

"THIS IS OUR chance," Judge Bates said quietly. "They're all together now. We have evidence against them that will hold up in court. I'll run up ahead through the brush, circle them, and come in from another angle. You stay here. When I come out of the brush, they'll naturally turn and look at me. Then you come in behind them, partner."

Tobacco's voice was shaky. "They might pull guns, Bates!"

"If they do, kill them! Don't take any chances. We'll be cleared of any action we take, you may bet on that. Be careful, Tobacco."

Tobacco grinned crookedly. "Do your best ol' man Bates!"

The judge hurried, careful not to make any noise. The snow was his best ally, for its softness muffled his overshoes. He was not opposite Tobacco. He was to the postmaster's right and, if shooting did occur, he would be out of line from Tobacco's fire.

He caught his breath, giving the three beaver poachers another look. His heart beat like a wild bird, jumping with excitement. He wished he had a drink but he had left his jug back with the postmaster.

The Box men had pulled the last beaver from the hole. "Eight of them," Jefferson said. "A good den, men."

Webster had pulled the dog out of the hole. "We'll put him in another

den. We got to work fast!" He turned and his face went chalk white. His words were a wild croak. "Jefferson —Pelican—Look, men, look!"

Judge Bates stopped, twenty feet away. Jefferson and Pelican turned quickly and stared at him. Webster seemed made of stone, the dog whimpering to get down. The whimpering was the only sound for a long second.

Jefferson finally rasped, "Judge Bates, huh! Laid a trap for us, huh? Didn't figure you'd left the country—"

Pelican's voice sounded far away. "Jefferson, he's got us!"

Jefferson had his hand on his holstered gun. Pelican was crouched a little, hand up. Webster still held the dog with an iron grip.

Jefferson said quickly, "There's three of us an' one of him! Drop that dog, Webster, an' pull against him!"

Webster mechanically dropped the dog, and the beast scurried over the bank. But the lawman didn't draw. Fear had pulled him into a frozen bunch of nerveless flesh. The judge saw Tobacco come from the brush then.

"He ain't alone," Tobacco growled.

Jefferson turned and pulled his gun. Judge Bates sawed-off shotgun belched once. Jefferson screamed, dropped his unfired gun, and went down in the snow, lying beside the beavers.

Tobacco has his shotgun flatly on Pelican's spine. "Just put your paws up high," he ordered gruffly. "You two, Webster!"

Pelican screamed, "Don't murder me, Jones!" His hands flew up empty. Sheriff Ed Webster's mittens rose. "My poor, poor daughter!" The lawman's voice was as dry as old ashes.

"You should've thought of her before." Judge Bates knelt beside Jefferson. "This skunk ain't dead, Tobacco. He'll live for trial. Man, how I'd like to sit on the Bench, passing sentence on these three men!"

WHEN SPRING session of district court convened three months later, the partners came back to Willow Brook. Judge Lemanuel Bates could not sit on the Bench because he was a witness against Jefferson and Pelican and Sheriff Ed Webster. When they got off the train Limpy Rhodes and Muskrat Pelton and Mabel met them, along with Judge Emil Simpson and Mrs. Simpson.

Mabel hugged the jurist. She kissed Tobacco. Limpy Rhodes had on his only suit, his whiskers hanging down over his four-in-hand tie. Muskrat Pelton carried the sheriff's star on his coat.

"They done made me lawman until next election, Bates. I like the job. I figure to run for the office come the fall primaries."

"You won't get it," said Tobacco sourly.

"Lot you know about it!"

"Don't fight, boys." Judge Bates had Mabel's hand in his. "Judge Simpson, how goes the evidence against those three?"

Jefferson had recuperated and had been taken from the county hospital and was now in jail with Pelican and Webster. Webster had broken down and told about Jefferson knifing Frenchy LaFevre. The carload of sheep pelts had been intercepted at Belle Fourche, South Dakota, on their way to St. Louis. Beaver hides were found cached between the circular sheep skins.

The government had one of its top attorneys on the case. The evidence against Jefferson and Pelican was too strong to fight. Webster pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years at the state penitentiary, and Judge Simpson recommended him for parole after three years.

"Your case is not as serious as that of your fellow members in crime, Mr. Webster. You went into lawlessness because you were weak of character and because your daughter needed financial aid so desperately. You were not involved in murder, for you have stated you only carried Mr. LaFevre's body to the cabin. You did not help murder him?"

"No sir."

"Who murdered Mr. LaFevre?"

"Milt Jefferson, Your Honor."

Jefferson's attorney shouted, I object, Your Honor! I object on grounds that this defendant is up for his sentence! He is not on the witness chair testifying against either of my clients!"

Judge Simpson looked at Judge Bates, seated in the first row of the packed courtroom. Judge Bates nodded a little.

"Objection sustained. The judge of this court acted in error. Ed Webster, are you ready to receive sentence?"

Webster stood up, hands locked in front of him, looking down at the floor. Judge Simpson stressed that Judge Lemanuel Bates had seen the State Health Authorities and now had Webster's daughter receiving treatments from a specialist hired by the state. He then sentenced Webster to five years imprisonment.

"Mr. Pelican."

Pelican stood before the bar.

Judge Simpson studied the indictment. "You have another name beside of Pelican, I presume? What is it?"

The thin man stood silent, eyes hidden beneath his lowered lids. He seemed undecided about something. The crowd was tense, sensing the man's indecision. Finally Pelican opened his eyes.

"Yes, I have another name. A few of them, in fact." His smile was thin. "I am going against the advice of my attorney. I am throwing myself on the mercy of your court. Once I pleaded not guilty to the charge of trapping beaver and of being involved in Mr. LaFevre's murder. I change that plea now to guilty on the one charge."

"Your Honor—" Jefferson's attorney was on his feet. "I object. This man has already entered one plea."

"Objection over-ruled. He may change his plea. Please proceed, Mr. Pelican." Judge Simpson drank from his glass. "To which charge do you wish to plead guilty?"

"To trapping beaver illegally."

"And the other charge?"

"I did not kill Mr. LaFevre." Excitement ran around the room and Judge Simpson pounded with his gavel to restore order. Pelican spoke again. "Nor did Mr. Webster kill him, either. I was more involved than Webster, 'cause me 'an' Jefferson were close friends."

Judge Simpson sentenced him to ten years at Rawlins in the state pen, and recommended no parole. He pounded his gavel and asked the crowd to be quiet or he would clear the court-room. Jefferson and his lawyer were talking earnestly. The lawyer than asked Judge Simpson if he could talk to him alone in his chambers. Judge Simpson declared a recess of five minutes and got off his chair.

"Judge Bates, accompany us, sir?"

Judge Bates walked through the swinging gate, a ponderous man. The solemnity of the occasion had demanded he leave his jug at the livery-barn with Timothy O'Rourke who, the jurist had noticed, was not at the trail. He and Judge Simpson and Milt Jefferson and the lawyer retired to Judge Simpson's chambers.

"What do you want, sir?" asked Judge Simpson.

The attorney said his client would change his plea if he could avoid the death penalty of hanging at the state penitentiary, Wyoming's demand made on convicted murderers. Judge Simpson looked inquiringly at Judge Bates. The heavy-set jurist thumbed his lip and studied Milt Jefferson.

THE MAN WAS thin and gaunt. His hair, in these three months, had acquired grayness around the forehead. He coughed now and put his head on the table. Judge Bates felt a tug of pity but his stern face did not show it.

"He apparently showed no mercy toward Mr. LaFevre," Judge Bates reminded. "However, Judge Simpson, we both must agree that legal precedent in the Great State of Wyoming deems that a confessed slayer, throwing himself on the mercy of the Bar, is, by precedent, and by his confession, allowed to spend the rest of his life in confinement and thereby escape the hangman's gallows."

Milt Jefferson spoke without raising his head. "I confess, Judge Bates

I murdered Frenchy LaFevre."

They filed back into the court-room, where Judge Simpson put the court into order again. He then sentenced Milt Jefferson to spend his life at the State Penitentiary without chance of parole.

"Take the prisoners to their cells Sheriff Pelton."

Muskrat had the men moving ahead of him down the aisle. Webster stopped by Judge Bates, who sat next to the aisle. He clasped the judge's chubby hand. "God bless you, sir."

Judge Bates' throat was tight. "I shall see that your daughter needs nothing, sir. You may rest assured on that."

Webster had tears in his eyes.

The other two men went by slowly. Pelican did not look at the judge and Tobacco, but Milt Jefferson studied them through hate-lighted eyes. They went out of the court-room toward the jail where two guards from the penitentiary awaited, for they and Muskrat Pelton were to take the men to the depot to catch the train to Rawlins. The crowd filed out.

Judge Emil Simpson came down off the Bench. He shook hands with Judge Bates and Tobacco. But the judge, now that it was over, had little formality. Timothy O'Rourke had his jug and Timothy had not attended the trial.

Mabel Pelton went to the livery-barn with the partners, her arms hooked through theirs. O'Rourke was already asleep, head on his arm as he slept on the floor, the jug beside him. Judge Bates shook the crockery.

"He's hit it hard." He uncorked it. "A sorrowful day it is for me, Miss Mabel, when duty calls that I see men go behind bars. Will you drink with me, Miss?"

"I shouldn't. Dad wouldn't want—"

"Your father is not here."

"All right." The judge noticed she had drunk from a jug before; she kept her upper lip in the right position. She took a big slug, too.

"And you, Tobacco?"

Tobacco shook his head. "You cain't tempt me, Bates. Here comes Limpy on the gallop. He'll send that liquor-line down for you!"

"That's what I'm afraid of." Judge Bates finally lowered the jug. "He's apt to send it down too low!"

MONTANA GHOST-BUSTER

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

Mark Patton saw the spread he wanted and the girl he wanted here in Montana, and he didn't propose to let any kind of ghost stand in his way for a moment!

THERE WAS one thing that irritated Mark Patton like sandpaper on an open sore—he hated any man telling him he wouldn't like something, without giving him the chance to decide for himself. Mark Patton had ridden fifty dusty miles to-day in search of three things, a house with a track of land, a wife, and the privilege of enjoying the first two undisturbed.

Now that the first of these three goals was within easy reach, Patton didn't intend to be talked out of it.

"Just what is wrong with this Skull Bone spread, sheriff?" he asked the man across the oak desk from him.

Sheriff Chance Dassock was a stout man, and he fit his swivel chair snugly. He had sharp, black eyes which glittered from beneath the protecting fringe of heavy eyebrows. Drawing on his cheroot spike, he studied the lean, well-muscled frame of his visitor.

"Ain't nothin' wrong with it," he said at length, "Except what folks are sayin'. Old Blasedale, the former owner, was murdered in bed by an unknown assailant. Ever since, Blasedale's ghost is supposed to hang out around the Skull Bone, lookin' for the gent who shot him. They say the ghost ain't particular who he scares. Me, I got my ideas about who bumped off Blasedale. Bill Withee, his neighbor, always wanted them rich Skull Bone grasslands. He could have shot Blasedale, then got cold feet when it came to offering to buy the spread."

Mark Patton's gray eyes were on the fat face. "Who's got it now?"

Dassock pulled on his cigar. "Relative of Blasedale's, name of Woodling. Boards here in town. Woodling don't want the bother of running the place, so he's got it up for rent. But three gents already have chickened out on him. Last one stayed the longest. Six weeks before he quit."

Patton waited in silence while the other drew on his cigar. "The last gent," Sheriff Dassock concluded, "Claimed he felt the wind of the spirit's bullet on his cheek. Of course it's all damn foolishness, but the fact remains that Woodling can't get nobody to stick. Place is a wreck. You wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole, pardner."

The muscles in Mark Patton's jaw bunched, his lips set. There it was again ,telling him he wouldn't want it. Patton got to his feet, stood looking down on the lawman.

"Mister," Patton said dryly, "I don't give a tinker's dam about the condition of the house or the fairy stories connected with it. I'm renting the Skull Bone, lock, stock, and barrel, and someday I'll buy it."

Sheriff Dassock moved his cheroot from one side of his mouth to the other. He looked at Patton a moment, shrugged.

"Well, young man," he said, "I reckon it's your funeral. If you suddenly decide you have to pull stakes,

don't say I didn't warn yuh. You never can tell about the Skull Bone."

Patton nodded. "I'll take my chances. So long, sheriff."

PATTON went to the hotel where Woodling lived. Sam Woodling proved to be a sour-visaged old man who seemed reluctant to speak of the trouble behind the Skull Bone. He agreed to take Patton on as tenant, and warned him not to pay any attention to tales of prowling ghosts and such.

"Only addle-pated idjits believe in ghosts," Woodling observed.

Mark Patton grinned. "If I see a ghost, I'll just chalk it up as a mirage or somebody's misplaced bedsheet. Don't worry, Mr. Woodling. You've got a tenant who doesn't scare at the first sneeze of a bedbug."

He paid a month's rent in advance, left the old man who now was chuckling delightedly. Sam Woodling looked as if he was having his first good laugh in years.

"Misplaced bedsheet—bedbug's sneeze—that's rich," the old fellow was saying, half to himself.

The cowman moved out into Vir-

ginia City's dusty street. Originally, Patton had lived in Sander County, in the foothills of the Bitter Boots. After his parents had passed on, and frequent dry spells had spoiled his land and cattle, he sold his Twin Fork U holdings and drifted. He rode through several counties, always keeping before him the picture of a modest home, and a wife to cook and talk to him. Mark was after good grazing land. He intended starting out with a small herd, working up gradually to a larger one.

Patton stopped in at Virginia City's largest saloon. He had to elbow his way through several tough-looking hombres drinking at the bar.

"Rye—straight," he told the barkeep with the rainbarrel shape.

The man drinking beside Mark with the fat, dimpled face, gave his name as Doc Topley, retired medico. He seemed friendly, and Patton told him about the Skull Bone rental. Doc Topley shook his head.

"Bad business," he said. "That spread's a hoodoo to whoever lives on it. Dassock wasn't exaggerating. Sorry you decided to play nursemaid to it, young fellow."

Mark Patton sipped at his drink. "How about this Withee gent? Anything in the talk about him doing Blasedale in?"

The ex-medico grunted. "If I was sheriff, I'd present Old Bill with a rope necktie. Guilty? Bill Withee deserves hanging as much as the skunk who shot Lincoln. Only Withee's too smart to get caught."

Topley paid up his drink, left. Patton, leaning on the bartop, was about to leave when a slender, black-haired girl came in. Her hair glistened in the lamplight. She had a full, red mouth, and her eyes were large and blue-black and bright.

She went up to the bar, slapped down a coin, and put her foot on the rail.

"A glass of applejack, Barrel Ben," she told the bartender.

The other men were eyeing her. One of them, a heavy-set, bearded giant, weaved up, grinning. He carried his drink in his hand.

"M'Gawd, boys, pipe the skirt!" he slobbered. "Next thing y'know, Barrel Ben'll be turning this dump into a crocheting parlor. Here, gal, have a real snorter. A man's drink what'll put hair on your—"

He choked, swallowed thickly, grabbed the girl by the arm and tried to draw her close.

With a sudden wrench, the young woman pulled free. Her slim brown hand sped to her belt, dragged out the gun holstered there. She fired from the hip, and the bullet removed the man's Stetson, buried itself in the woodwork above the row of beer bottles.

"I said applejack," the girl snapped, then turned her back on the other. "Let's have a little service, Ben. I haven't got all day."

She finished her drink in silence, the bunch of toughs staring. The man who had got his hat shot, now was melting through the swinging doors. Mark Patton smiled, set down his own glass on the mahogany top.

"Applejack evidently has a way about it," he said to the girl. "I'll have to try it sometime."

The girl threw him a frozen look. She wiped her mouth with her handkerchief, turned, and strode from the room. Mark Patton motioned to the barkeep now raising his head from beneath the bartop.

"Just who is that unbridled filly, Ben?"

BARREL BEN wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "That hellcat," he said slowly, "is Olga Withee, old Bill Withee's kid, from the Lazy B outfit. Just like her old man, toting a permanent chip on her shoulder. I heard you sayin' you just bought the Skull Bone. God help you. Old Blasedale's ghost on the inside, and a murderer like Withee on the out. Damn if I'd want them Withees for neighbors. Old Bill's got a sharp tongue and an itchy trigger finger. And that wench of his, a hell-spawned she-devil with a temper like—"

The barkeep's voice had ended in a surprised snort, for the simple reason that Mark Patton had the other's

shirt and necktie gathered up in a tight ball so that Barrel Ben could hardly get a breath. Patton drew the man half way across the bartop.

"Go kind of soft and easy," Patton drawled, "When you speak of that *lady*. If you think I'm kidding, repeat what you just said, and see what happens."

Barrel Ben writhed in the iron grip. He was a powrful man, at least fifty pounds heavier than Patton, but Mark held him as he would a child.

"The lady," Mark Patton explained quietly, releasing his hold on the other's shirt front, "is the woman I am going to marry."

He tossed over another coin, left the barkeep gawking. He strode through the swinging doors to the street outside.

Olga Withee was several doors down the boardwalk as Patton reached it. Patton increased his stride, came up with the girl when they were passing the hardware store. Olga turned at the sound of bootheels, frowned when she saw who it was.

She walked on a ways, and when Patton kept right on after her, she stopped suddenly, her small right foot tapping impatiently on the plank directly beneath it.

"I'm not accustomed," she said stiffly, "to being tagged by complete strangers. Mister, I'm reading you final notice. Get out!"

Mark Patton's brows raised. "You own the boardwalk, miss? I was under the impression it was public property."

He studied the girl's lovely face in the full light of the hot sun. Character, determination and wholesomeness were etched in the deep pools of her black snapping eyes, in the firmness of her red mouth, and in the erect way she carried her well-rounded form. Here was a woman not to be bought by any man's money or smooth talk.

"I'm your new neighbor," Patton told her. "I kind of reckoned it'd be good if I was to know who I'm going to live next to the coming years."

Olga Withee looked him over coldly. She gave a little snort. "Years? You won't last a third of that time on the Skull Bone, Mister Patton. I'll give you a month or so, at best. The ghost business, or haven't you been told."

"I've been told," Mark Patton said. "But I don't mind ghosts. My great grandfather is a ghost. They say he used to play Euchre with my grandmother long after the rest went to bed. I come from a long line of ghosts, Miss Withee. I figure old Blasedale's spirit and me'll get along fine. I might even get the old haunt to help me fix up the place a bit. I hear it's might seedy in the corners."

"They may have to fix you up," the girl replied dryly, "if you persist in staying. Only fools play with fire and furnish the matches to keep it going. Mr. Patton, you aren't even half funny. I'm a busy woman, and I don't intend wasting time arguing with you. Good day, neighbor."

AS PATTON rode his horse down into the green valley to the paint-worn buildings and the tumbled down corral which was the Skull Bone ranch, he still was grinning at the way the girl Olga had acted. Sarcasm? she dripped with it. spunk? the girl had the get up-and-go of a snorty mustang. That's what he liked about her. Mark Patton had tired mightily of the wishy washy, lavender and lace girls he'd known in the past. He wanted a girl who could stand up to him and let him know what's what. Her evident disinterest in him, made him all the more determined to win her.

"Though I've got to clear up this Blasedale murder business first," Patton mused. "Bill Withee may be a cantankerous old snort, but I'll bet he didn't do the killing. Still I'll do some looking around. Might stumble on something."

Sheriff Dassock and Doc Topley were right about the condition of the Skull Bone ranchhouse. Inside, the building was pretty much a mess. Dust and cobwebs hung over everything. The table in the center of the parlor had two legs broken. Springs snaked through the worn seat cover

of the morris chair by the fireplace. The rear left window had a pane missing.

Directly above the dirty fireplace hung the portrait of a white-haired man with long, flowing beard. Lew Stanley Blasedale, the inscription beneath read. Mark Patton experienced a strange inward cold sensation as he looked at the stern face. Those sharp green eyes followed you everywhere.

Patton moved into the other rooms. Dust and cobwebs, decay and neglect everywhere. The kitchen, with its broken-down stove and stove pipes scattered over the floor; the bedrooms, three of them, with their poster beds bare to the springs and splintered slats.

Mark found an old lamp in the kitchen with a supply of oil in it. He cleaned the sooted chimney with the rag hanging on a nail by the sink. He trimmed the ragged wick, lit it. Then he took the broom from the corner and went to work on the dust in one of the bedrooms.

An hour, later, hot and sweating, he sat on the sagging porch of the ranchhouse, and watched the sun drop behind the bluish hills. He rolled a quirley, stretched his long shape and smoked contentedly. He had accomplished something to-day and he was feeling good. He had acquired the home and the land, now all he needed was the wife, which he already had picked. And, of course, clearing up the Blasedale business.

Getting Olga to say "yes" wasn't going to be a cinch chore, nor would clearing up the killing and ghost affair, but all in due course, Mark Patton opined. Everything comes to him who waits, and keeps his eyes and ears open as he waits, was the cowman's version of the old adage.

Patton went back into the bedroom he'd cleaned, spread his duffle blankets over the springs of the bed and curled up in them.

"Home, Sweet Home," he sighed, and dropped off to sleep immediately.

THERE WAS plenty of work to be done on the Skull Bone, enough for a dozen men, but Mark Patton pitched in with enthusiasm. He bought a saw, hammer, nails and other tools in Virginia City, going in twice weekly for groceries. Soon the broken-down furniture and other articles in the old house began to look like new as Mark nailed, sawed, and painted. The dust was definitely absent now, and the spiders were forced to spin their webs out of doors.

Not once during those first two weeks did Patton see Olga Withee or her father. The cowman guessed they were occupied with fall roundup. Patton looked out of the window at the six dozen head of longhorn cattle grazing on the lush grama grass down valley. Those animals had set him back plenty, but Mark had a strong bull in the lot and he knew that his herd would be on the increase. By next spring, with weather and other conditions favorable, he should get a good price for his beeves at the market, he figured.

Up to now, there hadn't been any signs of the Blasedale ghost, and Mark Patton was beginning to think that the whole thing was a lot of build up gossip and superstition. That is, he thought that until the cool, cloudy night of September seventh, when the rafter above his bed gave way and almost killed him.

He had been asleep for over an hour. Suddenly, a sharp, high-pitched s c r e a m penetrated his drugged senses, became a disturbing reality. Patton sat up in his blankets abruptly. The scream repeated itself, closer this time, as though from the kitchen. The sound reminded Mark of a cross between a coyote howl and a panther squall.

The rancher slipped into his pants and boots, was about to make for the doorway, when the rafter came down without warning. The big beam crashed onto the foot of the bed, splintering it. Patton moved quickly, even then as grazed on the shoulder by the plank. It was like a streak of fire across his flesh.

Patton hurried on catfeet to the kitchen. A thorough search of the room revealed nothing. The mys-

terious, soul-rending scream did not repeat a third time.

Old Blazedale's green eyes followed him as he walked slowly back to the bedroom. Mark could have sworn he detected the suspicion of a sardonic grin on the portrait's immobile lips.

"Must be the jitters," the cowman grumbled. "But that scream wasn't imagination."

The following two nights were worse. The long, shrill scream, like a soul in anguish, came again, this time from the cellar. Patton rushed to the stairs leading down into the inky depths, almost broke his neck tripping over the stick lodged across the sixth step. Only by snatching at the railing, did he prevent a nasty fall.

Patton heard the scream once more, now back in the parlor. Mark ran into the room, reached the center, when a gun boomed from somewhere and the rancher felt the tug of a bullet at his arm. He whirled, spotted a murky shape on horseback moving rapidly away from the window.

Patton cursed, leaped for the corral and flung a saddle on his roan gelding. He spurred out over the dew-laiden grass, the moonlight etching Skull Valley clearly. The lone rider ahead was in among the pines, galloping down an old deer path which led to a marsh and small lake

Mark cut his horse sharply to the left, swinging the animal in a wide arc about a boulder ridge and coming out on the far end of the lake. He hadn't reined in a minute, when the other rider burst through the screen of ferns and almost rode him down.

Patton's gun covered the other. The rancher's voice jerked dry and brittle.

"Olga!"

It was the Withee girl. Flushed in face and bosom swelling, the young woman glared at the man with the gun. She could sense the accusation in Patton's slitted eyes, and it angered her.

"I heard a shot," she said sharply. "I was riding the ridge and saw a man ride away from your ranch. I gave chase, lost him in the trees."

MARK PATTON moved his horse closer. "Kinda funny, isn't it, you ridin' alone at two in the morning. Make a habit of it, or don't you need any sleep?"

Olga Withee's blue-black eyes blazed. "You think I fired that shot—! Why, you—!"

Patton's hand closed over the girl's right wrist. With a swift movement, he drew Olga to him, removed the gun from her hip. He held the struggling girl as he would a playful kitten.

"You— D-damn you!" Olga spluttered.

Patton raised her chin with his free hand, looked grimly into the beautiful face. "Listen, girl," he said, and his voice had a peculiar twang, "I'm not accusing anybody of anybody of anything—yet. But it looks funny, you riding away from here just after me being almost slugged."

"I told you I was riding the ridge," the girl shouted. "I'd been restless and couldn't sleep. I—"

Mark Patton nodded. "That may be. But it still looks funny. I don't want the girl I intend to marry being mixed up in anything shady."

Olga Withee seemed to freeze in his grasp. Then the words tumbled from her red, trembling lips. "You conceited—jackass! Marry *you!* I'd see myself in Purgatory first. You must be out of your mind. Let me go, you hear!"

Patton's grip about her waist tightened. Suddenly, he leaned over, brought his lips crushing down upon hers. For one breathless moment he held her so, the girl unable to move, and when he released her, it was because he was ready to do so. Mark Patton gazed hard at her, his lean, high-cheekboned face masking the surging tide of emotion in his heart.

"Marry, I said," Mark told her calmly. Then he was drawing slightly away on his horse, the girl's gun in his belt. "Now take me to your father," he ordered. "I want to talk over a few things with him."

Olga Withee seemed strangely reticent as she spurred her horse along ahead of Patton's. She rode over the valley grass, head erect,

speaking only once on the trip to the Lazy B.

"I'm not marrying anybody," she said, and her voice had a tremor in it, Mark thought. "Ever."

Patton nudged his roan. "Old maids aren't popular," he drawled. "Go on. Shake the lead out of that plug's hoofs. And remember, if you try any tricks, it'll be too bad. I'd hate to get rough with my future wife."

The cowman imagined he heard a slight sob from the girl, but he wasn't sure. Olga Withee had more sand than most men. Patton grunted, swung his horse after the pinto. Olga wasn't the sort to go around murdering people, but she might be covering up for her father. Old Bill Withee, according to town talk, was a pretty salty character.

PATTON REALIZED the old man hadn't been overrated when the girl and he dismounted, entered the Lazy B ranchhouse. Bill Withee was a big man, slightly bent and graying, with a hard, unrelenting mouth, and small, brown eyes which glared out past his hooked nose. Old Bill gave the appearance of a buzzard without the feathers.

The olster came to the door in his nightshirt, holding a lantern up to see who was pounding like blazes at this hour.

His sharp ryes widened as he caught sight of his daughter.

"Olga, gal!" he said. "What in tarnation! You been out ridin' again!"

The girl nodded wearily. "Yes, dad. I couldn't sleep. I ran into Mr. Patton here, our neighbor, who wants to see you about the mysterious shots around his spread."

Old Bill squinted into the night.

"The hell he does! Young Fellar, what you got to say can wait till morning. Good night."

The girl had stepped inside. Old Bill tried to slam the door in Mark's face, but the latter wedged his foot between the panel and the jamb. "What I got to say," Patton said quietly, "can't wait."

The rancher strode into the room, faced the two before him squarely. "This business of dead men's ghosts, falling planks and bullets has got to stop. Ghosts don't fire real bullets. A bullet from a real gun almost got me to-night. Somebody around here wants me to move, and don't care how they accomplish it. Like I said before, I'm not accusing anyone, but I'm damned soon going to find out who it is. What I want from you two is some help. Will you give it?"

Olga Withee had been looking at Patton. She turned to her father, "He also wants me to marry him, dad," she said in a low voice.

Old Bill Withee blew his top. He clamped his jaws, fists balled into twin bony spheres. Abruptly, he whirled, went to a corner of the room, returned with a long barreled shotgun. The old fellow pointed the muzzle of the firearms directly at Mark Patton.

"You get the hell out of here and fast!" Withee foamed. "I'm givin' you just five minutes to make tracts. If you're in sight after that, you'll find yourself married up to a load of buckshot. Get, now. I ain't foolin' !"

Mark Patton pulled tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket, rolled himself a brownie. He pushed the cigarette into his mouth, let it dangle while he finished for a match.

"Some gents go off half-cocked, he said, "And wind up doin' something they regret later. Now I figure you're smarter than that. You wouldn't want folks to think you're mixed up in this ghost-murder stuff. I figure you'll be on hand at the Skull Bone, tomorrow night, to see if we can't trap this gent who wants me to leave. Just drop in around eleven, the shinnanigans don't start until after twelve. And don't forget to come well-heeled, but then I don't have to tell you that."

He struck his match on the barrel of old Bill's shot gun, lit his cigarette, and handed the match to Olga.

"Better get to bed, it's late," he grinned at the two of them, and strode out into the moonlight.

Away down in the valley, riding

over the dewy grass, he still could hear old Bill fuming.

IN THE morning, Mark Patton rode into Virginia City and up to Sheriff Dassock's office. The fat lawman was plumped in his swivel chair, reading a copy of the Police Gazette, and munching on a large pretzel. He gave a short laugh, tossed the magazine onto the desk.

"Somebody been sendin' me the damn thing by mistake," he said, clearing his throat. "Have to write them fool publishers again."

He looked keenly at Patton. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. The ghost's giving you trouble already?"

Patton nodded. "He does pretty good for a spirit," and went on to tell about the gunshot and the rest. "Sheriff, somebody wants me to leave the Skull Bone, but I'm not in the mood. I figured maybe you could help."

Dassock went over to the window, stared out at the passersby. "Shots, screams, fallin' planks—it's gettin plumb monotonous. Best thing to do would be to stuff the house with a load of dynamite and blow it all to hell. But I'll see what I can do, legally."

"You can be with us to-night when we lay for the gent," Mark Patton suggested. "With Olga, old Bill and me.

The sheriff looked up. He was quiet a moment, then he smote his thigh a whack with his big hand.

"By Gripe, I'll do it!" he exclaimed. "Up to now, ..I've held off investigation because of other chores. Stage holdups and cattle rustlin'. But I'll be there to-night, you can count on it. I want to see if something happens with Old Bill where we can see him. If it don't happen, it won't look too good for Old Bill."

Mark Patton was silent. That's what he was afraid of. That Old Bill was behind the whole thing. If no manifestations occured with Old Bill present, that would look bad. If Old Bill didn't show up and the manifestations did occur, that would be worse. Either way, it didn't look any too good for Old Bill Withee.

Patton sighed. It wasn't nice to think of, the probability of the girl you loved being the daughter of a bushwhacker.

CASUAL INQUIRY about town revealed that many others were of the same opinion as Sheriff Dassock, Doc Topley, and Barrel Ben, the bartender. Old Bill Withee and the deceased Blasedale had had many a hot argument. They'd gotten into a rough fight once over boundary rights, and Old Bill Withee had come away with a black eye.

"I'll fix you, yuh damn range hog!" Old Bill had been heard to say, and the threat had gotten around. When Blasedale was found dead in bed, with a bullet in his brains, there were many knowing glances. But nothing could be proved. The guns of all those closely connected with the aged rancher were examined—even those of the fuming Withee—all with the same result. The bullet which had killed Blasedale had not come from these irons.

By a quarter to eleven that night, the Lazy B cowman and his daughter rode in to the Skull Bone ranchyard. Mark Patton met them at the door, and he noted the scowl on the older Withee's countenance. Olga Withee shifted her gunbelt.

"I had to practically knock dad down and drag him here, Mark," the girl said, and the use of his first name sent a little fire of warmth over Patton.

Old Bill spat into the crackling log fire. "I ain't here to help nobody," he grunted. "Just curious. I'm gettin' sick of hearin' about ghosts and such. Sooner we run down the whole thing and get it licked, the better."

Mark Patton returned to cleaning his six-shooter. "Glad we agree on something. Have some of those wild grapes on the table, you two. Picked 'em this morning in the brakes in the hollow. They're thick as flies and—Hello, here comes Dassock."

The Virginia City lawman strode into the room. He stared at Old Bill and Olga Withee, nodded finally. He threw a look at Patton which practically said, "keep your eyes open

and we'll catch Withee in the act." He drew Old Bill aside, began talking to him about the trap for the "ghost".

Mark took Olga on a tour of the rooms. "The place looked like it'd been a stomping ground for panthers," he told them "I removed more dust than is on the plains of Kansas. It's no king's quarters yet, but at least it's respectible some, and you don't trip over the cockroaches."

The girl smiled, drew near to him. "I think you've done a marvelous job. Mrs. Blasedale herself never had the house looking finer. You'd make somebody a fine wife, Mark."

Patton's hand was on her arm. The sweet scent of the girl's hair, her supple body and red lips so near his own, got the better of the rancher. He hadn't intended bringing up the subject of love or marriage again until Old Withee's name was cleared. Mark Patton took a deep breath, threw his arm about Olga Withee.

"You little devil," he said brokenly. "Half the time I don't know whether you're sarcastic or sincere. All I know is you're lovelier than a sunset and I'm telling you now I—"

Any minute, he expected her to struggle free, slap his face, try to put a bullet through him. Her silence troubled him. Lips parted, she lay tense in his arms, looking up at him with those big, blue-black eyes. Mark lowered his face to kiss the red mouth.

The sudden scream, twisting in from the parlor, tore them apart. It was followed by a shot. Mark Patton jerked, made for the doorway. "The ghost again!" he said, pulling his gun. "Quick, Olga, we've got to get to the sheriff and your dad!"

SHERIFF Chance Dassock was getting up from the floor, rubbing the back of his head in evident pain. He drew his .45 from its holster, pointed out into the black night.

"Hell to pay," he said thickly. "Bill went out to get a stick to clean his pipe, when some snake took a pot shot at me and almost blew my head off. Just a graze, I reckon, but it burns like sixty. Funny about Old Bill. Don't look right, him not bein' present when the lead starts to fly."

Olga Withee went white. "Are you accusing my dad of—"

Old Bill Withee shuffled in then. His wrinkled face was a screen of twisted anger. He waved a horny fist beneath Sheriff Dassock's nose.

"I heard what you said , you overgrown polecat. I can whittle you down to size, and don't you forget it. You take that back about me bein' the bushwacker, or I'll land a haymaker on that carrot beak of yourn what'll make a piledriver look sick, by damn!"

Dassock was replacing his hat. "Don't be a fool, Withee. I meant you ought to be on hand to help. I don't reckon it's much use now, lookin' for—"

Mark Patton had been listening intently toward the rear of the house. He had heard the ring of metal, like the strike of a horse's shoe on rock, and he didn't waste time explaining. He lunged out the back way through the kitchen and into the gloom. Now he heard the unmistakable pound of horse's hoofs on the packed earth and he caught sight of a rider silhouetted against the moon plate in the east.

Patton's horse was saddled and waiting, as the cowman had planned. Mark forked the roan in a long leap, spurred up over the ridge after the other.

The roan was swift of hoof, and with full wind from resting. Soon he overhauled the rider ahead, and Mark Patton raised his gun, threw a shot near the other's head. "Stop, or I'll shoot to kill!" the cattleman shouted.

The stranger turned only long enough to send a slug whining an inch from Patton's ear. "So you want to get tough," Patton jerked. He roweled, drew alongside the other man in a matter of seconds. Patton ducked another snarling bullet, then he was diving from his saddle, dragging the other from his horse, the two of them striking and rolling on the grass.

The strange rider had dropped his gun. He tried a few wild swipes at Patton, which the rancher evaded

easily. Patton grabbed the other by the coat collar, shook him like a dog worrying a rat. He gave the man a clip on the chin which made the latter's teeth click.

"Now, by Heaven," Mark Patton panted, "We'll get to the bottom of this thing. You come clean about everything, fellow, or by the jumping blue blazes, I'll knock out every tooth in your mouth, including your tonsils. Spit it out now, while you still got your health."

The man's health wasn't improving. Every time he'd get to his feet, Patton would knock him down again. The other's face became a bloody pulp.

"Wait! Wait!" he gasped. "I-I'll talk— Don't—hit me again."

Patton yanked him over the roan. "Save it for the sheriff. Get on up in front of me."

He swung up into the saddle behind the man spurred back to the ranchhouse.

The sheriff, Olga and Old Bill stared at Mark's captive in the light of the glowing lamp. "Doc Topley!" Old Bill Withee rasped, and Patton saw it was true. Topley, the retired medico, with his chubby, dimpled face looking as if a herd of cattle had surged over it.

Patton showed them the man's gun, with the three recently emptied chambers. "Go to it, Doc," Mark ordered tightly. "You've got your audience now. Spill!"

The ex-medico was staring at the lawman. "I— Sheriff, ain't there something you forgot to do?"

Dassock's right hand moved forward, and from it dangled steel bracelets. "It's hard to believe, but I reckon we've found the ghost. Doc, I'm arresting you for the murder of Blasedale, attempt to murder Mark Patton, and tonight, me. Stretch out them mitts, while I fix on these cuffs."

DOC TOPLEY'S lower lip was quivering. As Sheriff Dassock darted forward suddenly with raised gun muzzle, Doc dropped to the floor, rolled to one side. He scrambled to his feet, his bloody face screwed up in livid rage.

"D—damn you, Dassock!" he screamed, and Patton recognized the high-pitched cry as the yell he'd heard in the house. "Damn you!" I'm talking now, and you can't stop me. Sure I been scaring folks around here. but you're the one who has been paying me to do it. You wanted the Skull Bone's rich grasslands, got sore when Blasedale wouldn't sell, and shot him. You didn't know about that relative of Blasedale's, until he moved into town and took over the spread willed to him. You pulled the ghost business to scare off the renters, to induce old Woodling to sell. You dealt me in on the deal because I'd seen you kill Blasedale."

Chance Dassock's were slitted. "You're a liar, Topley."

Mark Patton watched the pair closely. He said, "I figured it was something like that, the way Dassock tried to discourage me from renting. Reckoned if I got everybody down here tonight, the entire mystery might be cleared up. Woodling's laid up with a cold, or he'd have been here, too."

Doc Topley, turning to Patton, continued. "Woodling didn't like Dassock, wouldn't even rent to him. Dassock soft-soaped him with favors, had finally got the old gent about persuaded to sell, when you came along and gummed up things. Woodling said he'd taken quite a shine to you, Patton, intended selling out to you in the near future."

"Dassock had me lay for you tonight, promising me a big cut if I succeeded. He figured Withee wouldn't show up, and we could pin your death on him. I saw Dassock sitting with his back towards me, mistook him for you, and fired. Now, instead of letting me go, Dassock double-crosses me, damn him. Better get his gun, Patton, before he—"

It was too late. Sheriff Dassock, sensing that further talk was useless, had swung his gun on the other four in the room. Gone now was the mask of genial surprise from the lawman's

plump, face, Dassock's mouth curled in a snarl beneath his flaring nostrils.

"Don't move, any of you," he grated. "Until I'm outside and ridin' halfway out the valley. I'll plug the first one that tries to follow."

He backed toward the door, gun covering them. That was when Mark Patton pressed Olga Withee's small hand with his own, muttered, "Here goes something," and pulled his .45 jerking to the right as he did so. He moved so quickly that Dassock's gunhand, swift as it turned, sent the bullet chewing into the floor where Patton had been. Before the lawman could trigger again, Mark's gun blasted, and Chance Dassock doubled on the doorsill.

The Virginia City sheriff staggered across the porch, fell a lifeless lump down the three steps into the dew-faced dust.

Olga Withee was beside Mark Patton, clutching at him with anxious fingers. "If he had gotten you with that shot—"

Patton grinned down at the beautiful face near his. This time, he didn't waste time talking. He found her mouth, kissed it. After a long moment, they had to pull away for breath, and Mark Patton looked into the girl's shining eyes.

"Like I tried to tell you," he said softly, "before we were so rudely interrupted, I love you. We'll be married just as soon as we can get this place cleaned of polecats."

Olga Withee fingered the third button of his shirt. "You seem pretty sure of yourself, don't you?" She whispered.

Old Bill Withee, roping the battered Doc Topley, looked up. Beneath the perpetual scowl on his leathery face, lingered the suspicion of a grin.

"He ought to be," he grunted "Seein' as how he's had his way in everything so far. Quit playin' hard to get, gal, and get on with your kissin'. This beatin' around the bush stirs my nannie."

And Mark Patton, with Olga Withee's arms tight about his neck, winked at the portrait of old Blasedale on the wall and at the green eyes which now seemed warm and friendly. Mark Patton had won the three things he had ridden over miles of rock and prairie flats for—a home, a wife, and security. It was a pretty swell world after all, and he'd like to see anyone tell him different.

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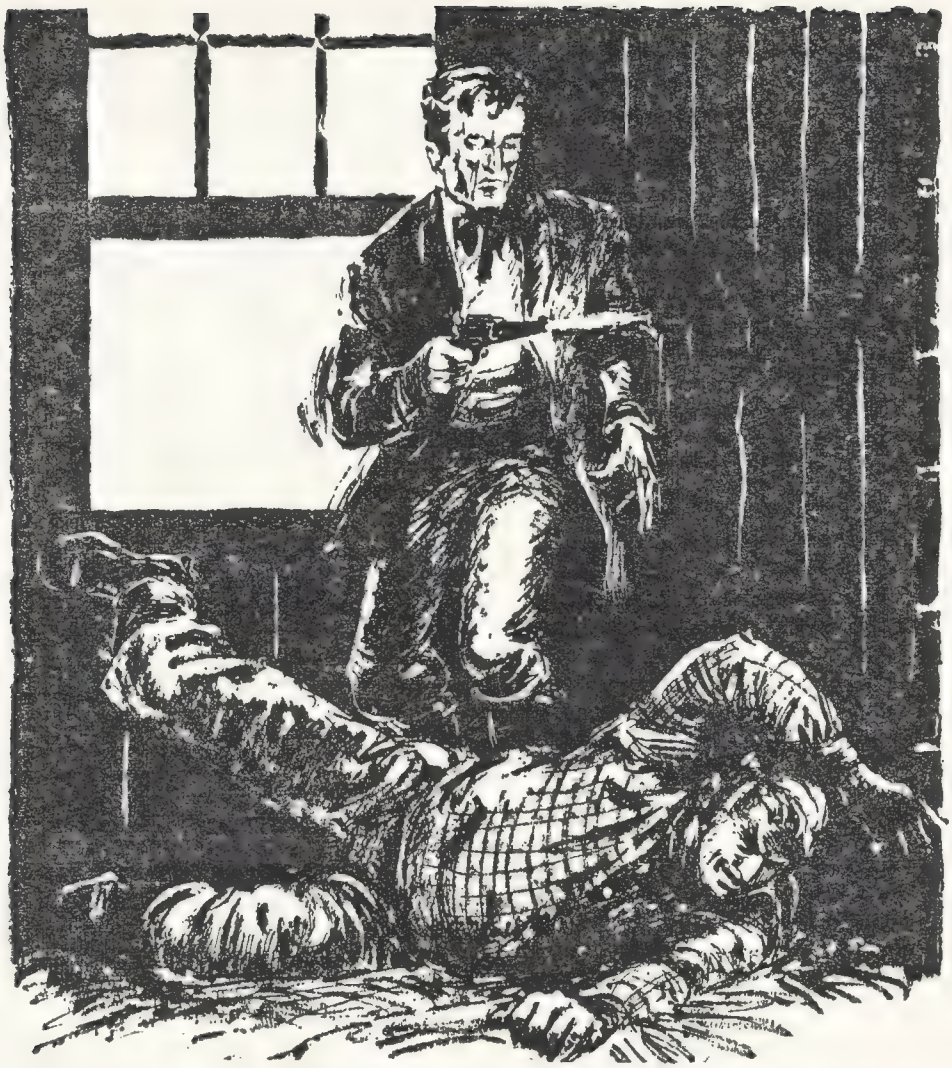

Gunbait For Satan's Crew

By George H. Weldon

Deacon Jones didn't want to butt into the trouble that had cost Bishop Morton his life, but the Deacon found that he had a personal stake in the matter.

WHEN THE short, squat man who'd said his name was Bishop Morton rolled over, Deacon Jones' thin lips split into a harsh grin.

Morton mopped at his mud-caked features with a handkerchief that had long since become a muddy rag

from dust and sweat. Still, enough dirt came loose so that his round cheeks and stub nose formed islands of white flesh.

"What's our chances?" Morton asked. He levered another shell into the rifle that had belonged to the driver.

"Of what?" Deacon Jones twisted his neck about. He was a tall, gaunt man, the sleeves on his dusty coat barely made it half way to a pair of knobby elbows. From underneath a pair of bushy eyebrows a high bridged nose lent him a predatory air. Blood trickled down his cheekbone. He daubed at it ineffectually and repeated his question.

"Of what?"

Morton nodded nervously, "Of getting away from those devils of Apaches—of course."

"Poor." Jones answered with the fatalism of one who has lived and faced death.

"You're a funny one," the bishop fumbled with a piece of rock. "You flag the stage down and climb in like the devil himself was after you and you run into this Apache ambush." He looked deadly serious, "Suppose —that you could go back to what you were running from," he squinted his blue eyes, "and you were running—would you go?"

Deacon Jones rubbed his long chin reflectively, "There's a chance that the shotgun guard made it into the next stop. A chance is all that a man can ask for."

"And you wouldn't have had a chance otherwise?" Morton answered his own question. He shook the water canteen and sighed.

"For a sky pilot you can handle a rifle pretty handy," Jones said gruffly.

Morton's tone was stubborn. "They need me in Redondo. I've crossed three states to get here and I don't intend to let a bunch of howling savages stop me."

Far up on the canyon rim a sunburnt body moved. Deacon Jones squeezed the trigger of the Winchester gently. The impact of the lead raised the skulker to his feet. For several seconds the Apache weaved on the edge of the cliff, his thin, dark arms waving. When he fell a chorus of yells arose from the rocky ground flanking the wrecked coach and the boulders that the two men hid behind.

"Nice shot," Morton said. "And at this range."

JONES sniffed. He was dog tired and every muscle in his body ached. He'd lost a good horse, run it to death and the thought of it now made him mad. It had been a big bay that he'd paid hard cash for from a rider who'd seemed down on his heels. But the fat, beefy-faced man who'd stopped him two days ago on the trail along with two hardcase riders back of him had deaf ears. He'd claimed the horse for his, his riders had backed him, and when Deacon Jones spotted the same brand on the strangers ponies that his big bay carried he'd offered to make amends for buying a stolen pony.

But not Beefy face. He'd barked out, "String him up, boys. We'll teach these saddle bums not to steal Rocky Kane's stuff."

The outcome had been simple at first. The boys hadn't been as fast on the draw as the Deacon. Still, the three of them had been persistent. They'd forced him to kill the bay while they switched ponies at nearby ranches.

Jones sighed. Eventually they'd find where he'd shoved the dead bay over the cliff and guess that he'd flagged the stage. He sighed again. It was mighty hard for a man to go straight.

He crouched low against the hot boulder now and struggled with a boot. Bishop Morton watched him out of red-rimmed eyes.

Deacon Jones wriggled his toes contentedly. Cow boots were never made to be walked in and he'd hiked miles before intercepting the stage. Only the thought of what his fellow passengers would say had kept him from jerking his feet out of them before.

Suspected horse thief or not, Deacon Jones stubbornly clung to his purpose. He'd had his share of

the shady pursuits that kept a man on edge and his last prison term had been the cincher.

"Must be having bad thoughts," Morton said kindly. "Your jaw sticks out like one of these boulders."

"What'd you do?" Morton tried again. "Are you a cattleman."

Jones made a wry grin. There was no use telling his fellow survivor everything. That he'd made up his mind to try and even his books with giving a helping hand to justice.

"I'm a book-keeper," he said laconically, his eyes fastened on the rim of the cliff. Soon the twilight would drop upon them and while the Apache had a dread of night fighting, the shifting shadows would encourage them.

The sudden wet thud of lead ripping into bone jerked him completely back into the present; Morton had gotten his. A wisp of rifle smoke drifted above a huge slab of upended rock halfway up the rocky cliff. Jones spaced two slugs neatly into the crevice, watched a rifle barrel tilt downward as the hand that gripped it relaxed. The gun had almost pulled clear when a shiny black head above a long arm made a grab for it. There was no remorse in the Deacon's face when his third shot smacked into the shiny black object. Probably that rifle had been stolen from a murdered cowpoke or slaughtered settler.

He sat with his back to Rock, the rifle sloped across his bony knees. An impulse seized him and he scrambled over and covered the dead man's face with the soiled handkerchief.

Before he wriggled back he reached inside Morton's pocket and drew out the long envelope that showed signs of wear and tear. It gave him no information beyond the fact that Morton had answered the call of a group in Redondo. There was a scrawled postscript stuck at the bottom of the letter that caused his eye to linger, Beneath the signature of A. Alexander someone had written in, "Send us a man." That and the statement that the last preacher had been driven out of town or else disappeared mysteriously made him frown.

He replaced the letter in Morton's pocket, his saturnine features thoughtful. Morton had all the earmarks of a decent man.

DOWN THE trail came a spatter of shots. Jones came into sudden life. He hammered the rim of the cliff until his rifle clicked empty. That spatter of shots and the clatter of shod ponies meant that either the guard had broken through or the gunfire had been heard by some range rider who'd carried the news back to the home ranch.

Howls of rage and disappointment came from the cliff. Rock dust spattered from the stage trail as the Indians fired their parting shots. By the time the body of riders came into view around the bend silence gripped the small hollow.

Jones rose to his feet and stretched his long frame with slow grace. Three of the riders swept on past him, eyeing the wreck of the coach from angry faces.

"You hit bad?" the speaker was a heavy set man, broad faced and with a tinge of red that showed through the tan of his face. "We hit leather soon as Joe Grimes, your shotgun guard came into town."

"I'll live," Jones slapped dust from his frock coat. He nodded at the body of Morton. "They got him only a few minutes ago."

He studied the face of the big man opposite him. There was a vague familiarity about the rider.

"I'm Mike Lanton," the rider swung down from his pony. He jabbed a thumb at a slant-jawed rider who swung down with him. "This is Cary Idson." He peered at the lanky survivor of the stagecoach. "I didn't catch your name, mister."

Jones took his time answering. He watched Cary Idson and the second rider, a wisp of a weatherbeaten puncher load Morton's body across a saddle.

This time there was a note of irritability in Mike Lanton's heavy toned voice. "We like to know names

around here," he suggested pointedly.

"You can call me Jones," the Deacon said. He wiped at the dried blood on his forehead.

Lanton opened his mouth to growl something but Cary Idson interrupted him. For the first time then Jones caught the glimpse of a star pinned to Idson's dirty, sweat streaked shirt.

"This dead guy was the one they'd figured on replacing the last shouter," Idson shoved the letter taken from Morton's pocket over to Mike Lanton.

Lanton read it. He folded it neatly into a double fold and tore it with one effort of his thick wristed hands.

Jones' eyes narrowed. There was an ugly quirk to the corner of his mouth. He said, sharply, "That wasn't your letter to tear up, mister."

Idson's loose lips spread and showed his teeth. Surprise wrote a message on his face. "You hear that, boss. This guy don't like your readin' other people's letters."

"Shut up!" Lanton ordered. He put on an oily smile.

IDSON clamped his thick lips together. The puncher with Morton's body slung across the saddle in front of him swung wide to outflank the gaunt man coated with dust. Jones saw the casual maneuver and grinned sourly. These men were no amateurs—and he was no fool.

"Look, Mister," Lanton said. "Don't mind Idson. He's excitable." His voice had softened but there was an underlying note of inflexible hardness.

"Then tell that ranny of yours to pull in his horns and get off my side," Jones said matter-of-factly. "Because I like to see what's in front of me."

All pretense of good humor left the blocky man now. He snapped. "Proddy, eh, and we just saved your hide. Okay, Mister. We don't want trouble makers in Redondo." He paused, "Any kind of trouble makers."

Idson frowned. "We can't just leave here out here, Mike. It'd just give the howler's something to yell louder about."

"We won't," Lanton said grimly. "But once you get in town Mister Jones or whatever your real name is; get the first stagecoach out."

He turned as the other three riders came back into the hollow.

Deacon Jones' slatey eyes swept over the newcomers. One of them, a clear faced youth with trouble eyes stuck out his hand. "They cleared out," he said hurriedly. "Probably some bucks from the reservation. Some damn fool sells 'em liquor." His face sobered. "Somebody else pays for it with their life or their families."

"Always," the Deacon answered.

"Name's Dale Simmons," the youth answered. "Run a store in Redondo. These guys are Riley and Bowers."

Riley, a medium built fellow with a scarred face nodded. Bowers nodded genially.

"Can I rent a room in town?" Jones asked.

"Hotel's full," snapped Idson. He glanced at Mike Lanton.

Jones saw the wink Lanton gave the lawman. He hunched his shoulders.

"That don't make any difference," Simmons interrupted. "I've got plenty of room." He eyed the Deacon's coat with new interest.

"He was the man that rated a frock coat," Jones jerked a thumb toward Morton's body, slung across a saddle.

Simmons and the puncher called Bowers followed his thumb.

"He had a letter in his pocket. This gent here tore it up," Deacon Jones said softly.

"Who was he?" Simmons asked Lanton. "Why did you tear the letter up?" Anger flared in his tone.

"Tell him," Jones said as Lanton hesitated, "Or do I have to tell him."

Lanton's face purpled with rage. He said heavily. "You're getting into something that don't concern you, mister."

"Who was he?" Simmons insisted.

Lanton growled. "His name was

Morton. Another trouble-maker your outfit had asked for."

Simmon's youthful face failed to hide his disappointment.

"IF YOU'D QUIT raising cain against the local authority," Lanton said with deliberation, "This wouldn't have happened."

"We're going to have camp meetings and group dances," Dale Simmons faced the beefy man. "If this fellow Morton is dead we'll go ahead."

"Try it," jeered Mike Lanton. "You know blame well that Redondo wouldn't get a quarter the income if the town was run your way." He shoved his square chin out. "And this guy Morton wouldn't have lasted either."

Deacon Jones kept his mouth shut. He had blundered in on something that he had no part of. Yet a growing realization caused him to almost automatically line up with young Simmons and Bowers. The hardcase called Riley had drifted until he was back of Idson and Lanton.

"What'd you do?" Lanton ignored Dale Simmons.

"That depends," Jones answered.

"On what?"

"On what needs doing."

Lanton thought that over. He said finally. "Okay, Idson, let's get back to town." He jabbed a finger at Deacon Jones. "And the law don't want saddle bums or strangers in town. Idson'll see to that. I gave you free advice."

"I heard it," admitted Deacon Jones peacefully.

"You can ride behind me," Dale Simmons offered. "And that offer of a room still goes."

Lanton overheard the offer for he reined back even with Dale Simmons.

"There'll be no more meetings," he said gruffly, "or I'll have Idson enforce the law against nuisances."

"You never answered my question as to what you do for a living?" Mike Lanton asked. His tiny little eyes were glaring with suspicion. "The guard lived long enough to claim they'd picked you up on foot." He shoved his thick skulled head forward on bull like shoulders.

Jones checked the surging desire to hammer a fistful of knuckles into the beefy face. The nearness of the man again aroused the faint feeling that somewhere's they'd met before.

"My horse broke a leg," he lied easily. "I cut across country until I hit the stage road."

"What'd you do?"

"Well," Jones took his time. He considered the bulky figure carefully. "If Simmons here needs a piano player I can fill in at that."

"And we can sure use you," Dale Simmons twisted about in the saddle. "We've got a get together this coming Friday. That gives us two days to practice."

The beefy face of Mike Lanton darkened. He drove his spurs into his pony and headed for the front rank of riders.

* * *

DALE SIMMONS led the way above his general merchandise store. He said, "I'll fix some supper and heat some water so you can pry off the dust."

Simmons' frank young face hardened. He leaned toward Deacon Jones, hands clenched over his knees. His words were crisp.

"You probably gathered that big Mike Lanton runs the town and Idson dances when he whistles."

"How come he lets you buck him at all."

Simmons face grew grimmer. "I had a little more capital than the others. They had to give in. All except me and Andy Alexander."

"Could that be the A. Alexander that signed the letter Morton carried."

"It was. Andy figured that if we could get the decent element welded together in a common purpose Lanton and his kind would be whipped."

"When the last preacher we had was chased or driven out of town Andy and I began having socials, singing, recitations, anything to bind the people together."

"What's Lanton and Idson say to

this?" Jones stretched his long legs for relief. His gaunt face was intent.

Dale gave a short laugh. "I don't know why I'm telling you all of this," he said gruffly, "After all you're just here for a few minutes."

Fire sparkled in the lanky man's eyes. His face in the shadows of the lamplight took on a hawkish appearance.

"I haven't bought a ticket yet," he said briefly. "Besides, I took a liking to Bishop Morton."

"How's this Idson?" Jones asked.

"Yellow, but with Lanton back of him he runs the town. He's got a brother that drifts in and out of town a lot. He's shifty and mean. Lanton's cousin, Rocky Kane runs a bit outfit at the far end of the county. Between them they have a nice layout."

Jones' eyes became icy. He brushed a lean hand across the stubble on his chin. The faint haunting knowledge that he'd seen the features of Mike Lanton became certain knowledge now.

SIMMONS poured another cup of black coffee. "Idson's brother and Kane work a game between them," he said. "Idson meets some drifter, sells him a Kane horse at a decent price, and then Kane jumps the stranger for riding stolen stock."

He raised his eyes suddenly to Deacon Jones' rocklike face.

"You sick," he asked suddenly. "You look like you'd seen a ghost."

"It wasn't a ghost," Jones said grimly. "Guess I'll miss that stage. Is the piano playing job still open?"

"It is," Simmons spoke slowly, "But stranger you're taking a hand in a game that nobody dealt you chips in."

Deacon Jones gave a loud booming laugh. Coming from his craggy face it sounded odd and out of place. "I was dealt in without knowing it," he said, "And I'll play the hand out."

"Good," grunted Dale Simmons. "Alex should be here soon. He drove over to the railhead in a buckboard to pick up his new bull fiddle." His voice was light now and some of the studied seriousness left his face.

Deacon Jones had just climbed into a new shirt and pair of trousers that Dale Simmons had went down into the store below for when shuffling footsteps sounded on the stairs. Dale Simmons looked up from the two week old San Antonio paper he was reading and glanced at the clock.

"Reckon that's Alex," he said, "But his steps sound different."

"Lugging the bull fiddle probably," Jones replied. He buckled his Colt about skinny hips. "That'd wear Samson out."

When Dale pulled the door open a short man with grey hair surged forward into his arms. Blood showed in the short beard that he wore. His face was battered and bruised and one eye closed. He still gripped the broken string and bow of a bull fiddle.

Jones pounded past him as Simmons lifted the beaten man in his arms and across the room to a couch. It was dark outside, the moon obscured behind thick, heavy clouds. From the shadows a harsh voice drifted up to Jones.

"We warned you, Simmons. It'll be worse next time."

The Deacon kept his mouth shut. He bounded down the steps toward the sound of the voice.

In the darkness someone gave a startled gasp. Feet pounded on the board sidewalk, clumped heavily on the dirt of an intersecting alley.

Jones hammered two shots at the faint shadow of a running man. The man screamed, but kept on going.

"Don't be a fool!" It was Dale Simmons and he grabbed Jones by the gunarm. "You go chasing up these alleys and they'll shoot you in the back."

He led the fuming Jones back up the stairs and into the room. While Deacon Jones watched he got a pan of hot water and wiped the blood from the beaten features of a wiry old timer.

Jones turned his head. It had been a brutal beating and done in cold blood.

THE INJURED MAN mumbled through thick, puffy lips. "They stopped me on the way back, two of 'em. Tried to grab my fiddle." Tears came in his pale blue eyes. "I been saving a long time for that fiddle, sent all the way to Chicago for it." His fingers groped for the broken bow.

"Did you recognize them?" Simmons asked in a tight hard voice.

"They wore masks," the old timer said, "But when we was scuffling around the mask came loose on one of 'em. It was that no good brother of Idson's."

"I think this brother of Idsons's will have quite a bill to pay," Jones said grimly. "What's his first name."

"Cliff," Dale answered. "But don't go after him now."

"Claimed we wouldn't have no social," Alex muttered. "Maybe they're right. No piano player, no bull fiddle."

Dale put a wet compress on the wounded man's lips. "Don't worry about it," he said.

"We'll have music if the devil plays the tune," Jones picked up the broken bull fiddle. He stared at it closely.

Old Alex laughed through puffed lips, "By golly," he mumbled, "I gave Kirk Idson a switching with a bow that he'll remember. Wait'll I get on my feet again."

Dale Simmons pulled a blanket over the old man. The sparkle had left his eyes to be replaced by a cold hatred. He got up from the bedside and buckled on a gunbelt. Jones watched silently, then he asked, "What's that for?"

"Damn them!" Dale snapped with bitter contempt.

"And that's just the way they want you to play the hand," Jones' voice was casual, only the flinty hardness of his face exposed his nature. "You're no gunhand," he said. "I can tell that; but I'll bet this Idson and the ranny with him are gunslicks."

Simmons looked sharply at the lanky man.

"Alex means a lot to me," he said.

"Then the thing to do is to carry out what he wanted to do. Have the dance and social."

The face of the youthful merchant softened. He bit at his lip, glanced at the sleeping figure of Andy Alexander.

"You heard what they said?"

"Yes." Jones grinned sardonically. "But maybe Mike Lanton will set an example for the rest of the town."

"Lanton owns every gambling joint in town," Simmons was puzzled. "He won't do anything that might mean a decent place."

"Uh huh," Jones said thoughtfully.

"He's a proud town boss," Simmons answered.

* * *

"NOW HERE'S a big bay," the livery stable man said, "Long legged and deep bottomed." He glanced up at the craggy features of Deacon Jones hopefully."

The Deacon shook his head. He liked the looks of the big bay but a dollar was a dollar.

"Yuh need a horse if yuh figger on stayin' around here," the ancient stable keeper argued.

"Yeah," a throaty voice cut in from the open doorway of the livery, "Yuh need a horse to hit out of town with."

Jones whipped around. He was in the half shadows of the barn. The features of the two men in the doorway were harsh and plain in the sunlight.

"Hey," a thin necked hardcase snapped suddenly, viciousness in his voice, "You're the stranger that I—"

"Sold a stolen horse to," finished Jones. He braced his back against the stall.

Cary Idson, the second man to block the doorway stepped out of the sunlight that framed him. He moved with catlike grace about two feet away from his brother. He snarled with open hostility, "Accusing a man of being a thief, hey," he tumbled his words out fast. He looked at his brother, asked sharply, "Ever see him before?"

"Yeah," Kirk Idson replied. "And I reckon Rocky Kane might want to see him."

"That's a bad thing to say," Jones replied.

"We didn't come to listen to a sermon," Kirk Idson's face writhed. He carried a thin welt across one cheek.

Kirk Idson half sank into a gun man's crouch. He glared at -Jones suggestively. Cary Idson shook his head.

"You ignored my orders to get out of town," his voice became high pitched. "There's a stage leaves town tonight at nine o'clock. Be on it—unless you ride out earlier."

Jones pursed his lips. He looked from one of the Idson brothers to the other.

"You sound inhospitable, sirs," he said sorrowfully. "Why I've got a job tonight. I even thought that maybe your boss Mike Lanton would join in the social."

"Let me," begged Kirk Idson, his welt marked face livid with suppressed rage.

"You'd better watch that brother of yours," the Deacon said softly. "He might learn that not all the people he jumps are old and carry old bull fiddle bows."

Kirk's rage was a violent thing now. He ranted and cursed and surged forward.

Cary Idson sidestepped. "You asked for it, Mister," he growled.

Jones tried to sidestep, slipped on a piece of worn leather harness and went off balance. Kirk grunted. He swung a wide right that clipped Jones on one ear, made a ringing sound in his head.

The gaunt man staggered and shook his head. Cary Idson's voice shouted encouragement to his brother. The boiling rage inside Jones settled into a deadly calm. He stepped quickly forward, met the bulling figure of Idson, coming in. He sank a straight left that whistled deep into the whiskey paunch above the gunbelt buckle. Idson grunted harshly. There was no mercy on the lanky face of the Deacon. He rammed a right cross with all the strength of his wiry body behind him flush on the pointed chin opposite him. Cary Idson shouted for Kirk to punch.

Kirk Idson's head rolled loosely, his eyes clouded over. He hit like a bag of feed.

There was a loud sigh from the livery man. Cary Idson's eyes bulged. His face was a livid mask of disbelief and hate. He moved his hand toward his gunbutt.

"Not that," Jones said.

Idson's mouth was a round O in his swarthy face. He stared into the yawning muzzle of Jones' Colt.

"By golly, mister," the old liveryman gasped. "That's the first time Kirk Idson went down—and stayed."

Cary Idson struggled with himself. His hand wavered on his gunbutt. He watched Kirk grovel on the dirty floor of the stable, straw sticking to him. When he lifted his eyes they were ugly pools of black fire.

"That stage tonight. Be on it!" His words trembled.

"Tell your boss, Mike Lanton," Deacon Jones drove his words home with bullet swift emphasis, "That the next time he wants his dirty work done—to try it himself!"

He left the Idson brothers, stepping swiftly out of the livery barn and angling behind. His fist ached and he rubbed the scraped spot where Idson's beard stubble had cut the skin.

THE EMPTY storeroom above Dale Simmons' general store was a huge affair. Sweat made a wet spot between Deacon Jones' narrow shoulder blades. With Dale Simmons and the young cowpuncher Bowers he was building a slight stage raised from the floor level about three feet. Outside the first drops of a summer rain began to fall.

From Simmons the Deacon had learned that young Bowers was the son of an old timer rancher whose vast holdings lapped against those of Rocky Kane on the far range. Bowers liked trouble—and he liked Dale Simmons.

Dale Simmons laid down his saw and walked to the window. He stood there a moment, hands thrust in pockets and his face bleak.

"Dale, you're jumpy as a wild maverick," Bowers looked up from where he held a board for Jones to drive home a nail.

Simmons swung around.

"I saw Idson today," he said. "He came into the store. There'll be trouble if we hold the meeting tonight."

Jones looked up from his job of work. Sweat and sawdust laid a fine film over his face.

"This is a good town—underneath," he said, "And besides, maybe Mike Lanton isn't hard to get along with. Have you ever heard him sing?"

Bowers looked from Simmons to the bland face of Deacon Jones. He raised an eyebrow quizzically. "If Mike Lanton ever sang here he'd be laughed out of town."

"He'll be sitting in that office of his over in the Wildhorse Saloon tonight," Simmons looked curiously at the tall man. "You've got a chance to clear out of here tonight," he said slowly, "After all, we live here."

Young Bowers glanced out the window. He snapped angrily, "And here's more trouble. Rocky Kane's in town."

The Deacon dropped his hammer suddenly. The noise filled the empty hall. He made it to the window in two big jumps.

Beneath him the beefy red faced figure of Rocky Kane hurried out of the rain into Mike Lanton's saloon. The batwing doors swung closed behind him.

By seven thirty almost sixty people filled the big hall. On the stage stood a battered piano. The crowd was a silent moody one. Dale Simmons got up and made a little speech, told several jokes but the audience reacted slowly. Only when Deacon Jones sat down at the piano and began to play did they lean forward and some of the scared look leave their faces.

The music filled the hall and finally under Dale Simmons' urging voices began to roll out in "Oh, Susanna." The feeling spread. Jones followed up with other favorites and Dale Simmons' worried look began to leave his face.

From the front entrance of the hall a door slammed shut. Jones, busy at the keys, and lost in sheer enjoyment kept playing until only toward the last of the song did he notice that the volume of voices had shrunk. He glanced up from the keyboard.

"You, up there!" A harsh grating voice snapped.

Jones swung around.

Cary Idson backed by his brother blocked the doorway.

Dale Simmons hurried down from the platform. People craned their necks about. The last voices stopped singing.

"You've got till nine o'clock," Cary Idson growled. "Break this yelping up." He glanced up at the gaunt figure at the piano. "It's against the local ordinance anyhow."

Dale Simmons had pushed his way through the crowd until he stood directly opposite the Idson brothers.

Idson grinned crookedly. "You heard that, Simmons, nine o'clock or we'll break it up."

DALE SIMMONS made a grab for his gun. Deacon Jones fastened it in a steely grip. So silently had he worked his way through the crowd that even the angry Idsons had failed to notice it. Young Bowers, who'd gone out for more music sheets came up the steps just then and behind Cary Idson.

Braced by the Deacon and with the silent threat of Bowers behind them Cary Idson dropped his hand from his gunbutt. He turned on his heels but spun about long enough to shout loudly, for the benefit of the crowd. "Till nine o'clock, folks."

He tramped angrily downstairs followed by his brother.

Deacon Jones had never played better. He coaxed music out of the warped piano that filled the souls of the listeners, but when he turned around there had been a thinning of the crowd.

Behind the shelter of a stage wing Dale Simmons pulled out a watch and glanced at it. He bit his lips.

Jones got up and took a bow. He stepped into the wings.

"It's after eight o'clock," Sim-

mons said. He looked at Jones with angry eyes. "They're still leaving," he added as the shuffle of feet sounded.

Jones picked up his flat crowned black hat. "You hold what you can here," he said. "I've got a little unfinished business. Good music needs an audience." He grinned mirthlessly. "It hurts my feelings when people walk out on me and it makes me mad when somebody causes it."

Simmons looked at him suspiciously. "I can't blame you, Deacon," he said slowly. "If you're aiming to catch that stage, don't beat around the bush."

Jones left Simmons, still angry and puzzled and made his way down the back stairs. He came out into a back alley and a drizzle of rain. He jerked the flat crowned hat farther down and made his way a block up the alley.

Mike Lanton had a small leanto in back of the Wildhorse Saloon. Jones recognized the two ponies, sheltered there as belonging to Lanton and his visitor, Rocky Kane. Off to one side of the back door there was a window. Before he entered, the Deacon glanced through and saw about a dozen men.

He entered by the back door so silently that he was at the foot of the stairs leading upward before he was noticed.

"Hey, you," a hoarse voice shouted. "Nobody goes up there." From behind the bar a barkeep started forward.

Jones ignored him and the barkeeper hesitated long enough for him to get to the head of the stairs. At the end of a short hallway a door blocked his passage. Behind the door came a hum of voices.

Behind the Deacon footsteps raced up the stairways and an angry voice that sounded like Kirk Idson shouted oaths.

THE DOOR was unlocked. Jones gave it a shove and went in, gun drawn. He slammed the door shut and shot the bolt home before the two startled men could say a word.

Mike Lanton sat behind a scarred desk. Opposite him, Rocky Kane held down a chair.

Kane reacted first. He started to go for his gun and stopped suddenly. "You!" he growled.

Lanton's surprise faded. He found his voice.

"People usually knock," he growled, "What'd you want, stage fare?" he glanced at the clock on a shelf.

"You know this jasper?" Kane asked.

"Enough to order him out of town," Lanton snapped. He asked suddenly, "You crazy?"

"No," Jones replied. "Can you sing?"

Lanton fumbled for words as someone knocked on the door.

"Tell him to beat it," Jones ordered. He jammed the muzzle of his Colt forward.

"Okay," muttered Lanton. "Come back later, Kirk," he shouted.

"Now," Lanton said, "Talk." He was angry and his words were spat out.

"Why," said Jones mildly, "Since you're a leading citizen I figured it'd be nice if you set an example for the town over at the social. You, too, Mr. Kane."

Lanton sputtered.

Kane snarled, "You'll hang yet for being a horse thief." He made a motion to get up from his seat, fell back when the Deacon switched the gun muzzle in a line with his heart.

Kirk Idson slammed his foot against the door. "What's going on in there?" he shouted.

"Tell him to get away," ordered Jones' quietly.

Lanton hesitated, then called out, "It's all right, Kirk."

"You're making a mistake, Mister," Kane's voice was thick and ugly with rage. He eyed Mike Lanton angrily, "I thought you ran this town, Mike."

"That's what this tinhorn will think," Lanton rasped. He asked sourly, "What the devil is your game?"

"I haven't anything to play at," Jones kept a flat tone to his voice. "Unshuck your gunbelts, gents and we'll take a little walk."

Lanton said doggedly, "You're crazy," but he unbuckled his gunbelt. Kane followed suit.

"All right," there was a queer note of excitement in the lanky man's gaunt face. "We'll go out the back door, gents, and over to the social."

Lanton looked slowly at Kane.

He got up easily, followed by the beefy red faced rancher.

"You figure on holding that Colt on us," Mike Lanton asked softly.

"No," Jones replied. "But I've got a derringer in my coat pocket here that can hit a man before your staked out gunnies can stop me."

Kane gulped. He snorted at Lanton. "Damn you for a blundering idiot. What's this fool aimin' to do?"

The town boss didn't answer. Rage pulled his face into taut lines, his eyes narrowed.

WITH THE LANKY, frock-coated Deacon behind them the two men led the way to the ground floor. It was still raining. Kane protested angrily at getting wet. Mike Lanton growled over one shoulder, "Jones, this is your last chance. Get on that stage."

"You get up there and do what this jasper suggests," Kane blurted out, "And your grip on this town won't amount to a tinker's damn." He sputtered as rain beat against his face. "They'll laugh you off the range."

The three men with Jones two steps behind cut across the street. Between the shelter of two buildings a darker shadow moved.

"If that's one of the Idson's," Jones said matter-of-factly, "Call him off."

Lanton said desperately, "Hold it, Kirk!" And as the three men passed the building and came to the foot of the stairs he blurted out. "Listen, there's two thousand dollars in my desk. Take it and get out of town."

"You blasted coward," snorted Kane. "If this was on my range I'd run this long legged tinhorn out on a rail."

Dale Simmons turned in surprise as the back door of the hallway opened. When he saw Kane and Lanton he stopped midway in his act.

Only a handful of people still sat in the hall. Here and there entire sections of hastily set up seats held only a person or two. Even as the Deacon peeked around the corner of the wings, several of these glanced hastily as their watches and shuffled to their feet.

Mike Lanton grinned crookedly. He jerked off his wet hat and watched water drip to the floor. Murderous anger flared in his eyes, mixed with triumph on his face. He growled to Dale Simmons, "These people are beating the deadline, Simmons. They're smart. When Idson and the boys come up the stairs you're washed o u t. Understand, washed out!"

"Go out there and hold them a second," Jones pleaded. His bony face twitched. "Tell them that a couple of leading citizens will join in the next song."

At the back of the hall young Bowers shouted. "Idson's on his way up."

"See," gloated Lanton.

"Good," replied Jones. "They'll be here in time to watch you sing."

"Lanton," said the Deacon, "I've been wanting to do this a long time." He pulled his hand out of his coat pocket.

Knowledge widened Lanton's eyes. He grinned savagely, said to Kane, "Watch this." He drove a short stabbing left.

Jones didn't move. The punch brought blood to his face. Out on the floor, people halted as hammering sounded on the door. Bowers looked up at the stage questioningly. Simmons yelled at him to keep the door locked.

Jones met Lanton chest to chest. This was no time to be fancy. He smashed at Lanton's thick waist, felt his fist dig deep, ignored the smashing blows on his face. The tan on the boss' face grew grey. Kane edged forward but stopped at Dale Simmons' words, "Keep out, Kane."

Lanton grunted with pain, began to back away. He was in clear view of the handful of people now. He jerked his knee up, caught Jones, drove breath from his body and doubled him over in agony. Kane shouted encouragement and the knocks on

the front door changed into a medley of metallic blows from gunbutts and oaths.

THE TOWN BOSS rushed forward, fists swinging in round house blows. Slowly the pain racked figure of the lanky man straightened up. Jones snapped Lanton's head back with a straight punch to the jaw that spun the thick man around. He grabbed the bulletlike head and locked it under one arm. Up front the door began to bulge inwards. Bowers hesitated, then came forward to make his stand with Simmons and the Deacon. The townspeople huddled to one side, fascinated by what was happening on the stage.

Jones ground his knuckles into Lanton's temples. Mike writhed with pain. He swore, then begged for Kane to free him. Kane froze under Simmons' icy stare.

"You'll get out there and sing," Jones snapped. He grabbed a song book, shoved it into Lanton's hands.

Lanton threw it on the floor.

Jones ground his knuckles into the man's temples again.

Simmons picked up the songbook, gave it to Deacon Jones. Again Jones shoved it into Lanton's writhing fingers. Mike groaned with pain. "You'll sing," Jones voice was low and the wing hid them from the knot of people now, "or this," and he put the pressure on again.

This time the fingers held the book.

"Stop it!" Lanton groaned. "I can't stand it."

"Then sing!"

"All right," Mike Lanton mumbled, "But wait till the boys get in here."

Dale Simmons led the way onto the stage. His voice rose by itself to the sound of splintering wood. He stopped after a few lines, made an announcement that swung the spectators eyes from the door.

"We'll be joined in this by Mr. Mike Lanton," Dale said. He beckoned.

Jones gave the short figure a shove. Mike Lanton literally slid out in front of the open mouthed audience.

Jones made a move toward his coat pocket. Lanton gulped, his eyes on the front door. Yet he began to sing hoarsely from the book. Dale Simmons joined in and from the wings, Rocky Kane, prodded by Jones' derringer raised his gravely voice.

Then, from the audience, a woman rose her voice. Old Andy Alexander, from the front row had a high pitched voice that he used now. Gradually other people took up the song.

When the front door crashed in, Cary and Kirk Idson with three hardcases behind them stood paralyzed.

Lanton's face was scarlet. His voice broke off in the middle of a word. He jerked his head, triumph written on his face. Jones shoved the muzzle of his Colt forward now and made a crook with his arm. Lanton picked up the song hoarsely.

The song ground to an end.

CARY IDSON'S voice boomed from the end of the hallway, "All right, you folks. I' gave you warning. You, Simmons, you're under arrest."

"For what?" Simmons growled.

"You know—singing—holding this meeting and making a nuisance."

"Mike Lanton gulped. "You tell them to join in the song," Jones ordered. "Or I'll put a slug where you'll take hours to die!"

The pleased expression on Lanton's face changed. He said shakily, "Cary, you and the boys join in."

Cary Idson's face was a mask of surprise. He grinned wolfishly. "Our orders was to break up the meeting." He grabbed a chair, raised it above his head, smashed it on the floor.

Dale Simmons sprang forward, hand reached for his gunbutt. Idson whirled about, wolfish pleasure on his face. His draw was a thing of beauty, yet fast as it was a shot beat him.

Cary Idson yelped with pain as the bullet from Jones' arm nicked his gun wrist.

His hardcases spread out, went for their guns. Jones grabbed the scuttling figure of Mike Lanton with one arm.

"Get 'em," yelped Lanton. He kicked against the bare floor.

The Deacon's face sagged. Already Dale Simmons was cornered and young Bowers had a pair of hard-cases flanking him, waiting for him to draw.

"You see," yelped Lanton. "These people ain't worth fighting for. They won't help you."

He tugged desperately and Jones, his attention distracked by the commotion on the floor felt his enemy easing out.

Kane surged forward. Jones met him with a gunbarrel across the face. The beefy man skidded along the floor until his head hit the heavy piano. He lay still.

And then the heavy scuffle of feet cut across, drowned but the taunts of Cary Idson and his men and the bellowings of Mike Lanton. From both directions they came, some with six-guns, some with rifles and a few with shotguns. The heavy drawn look faded from the face of Deacon Jones. He released his slipping grip on Lanton's head.

"There's your answer, Lanton," he said. "Look!"

Dale Simmons ignored the sixgun on him, made his way forward. His face was lit up. "They were hit running," he said. "They knew it was deadline time—and showdown time and came back armed."

Old Andy Alexander stood up. Between bruised lips he shouted, "Lanton, Kane, and the rest of your pack rats," he coughed a bit of blood up, "Sing us a song, then get out of town."

Behind him the mob of townspeople laughed with approval.

And watching them, Deacon Jones knew two things for certain now. One was that Lanton and his crew were a bunch of the poorest singers in the world; and the other, Redondo had shaken itself free.

It was he knew, time for an itchy footed person to be drifting.

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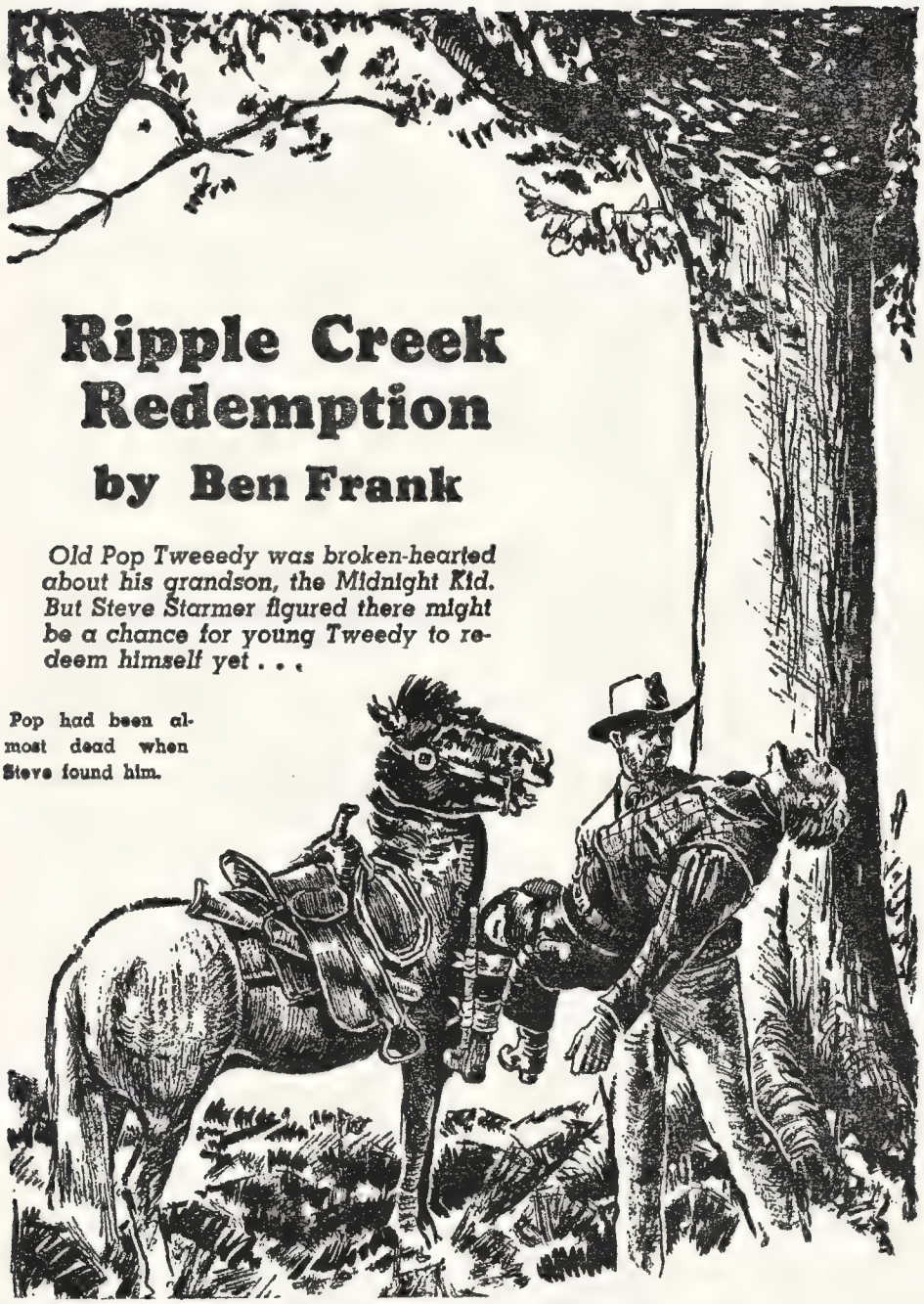
Old Pop Tweedy was broken-hearted about his grandson, the Midnight Kid. But Steve Starmer figured there might be a chance for young Tweedy to redeem himself yet . . .



Pop had been almost dead when Steve found him.

STEVE STARMER, standing at the window of his lone cabin on Ripple Creek, watching the rain turn into rivulets on the panes, reckoned he just wasn't built for being alone. That's why he now felt a stir of gladness at sight of the two approaching riders, even if they were packing a lot of hardware and had their hats pulled low over their eyes.

Thinking back, now Steve wondered how he'd ever stood those first four weeks, living out here by himself and trying to find some traces

ot yellow in the creek. The fact was, he had just about gone crazy with no one to talk to and to hear talk until he had found old Pop Tweedy half-dead from hunger and exposure.

"Good ol' Pop," Steve muttered as he watched the men ride up.

Pop was just an old saddle bum whose weary horse had stepped into a hole, broken a leg and tossed Pop to the hard ground. Pop tried to get to his feet, but one ankle refused to hold him. After he'd shot his floundering horse, he crawled into the shade to die, figuring that no one would ever find him in this God-forsaken part of the country.

Besides being good company for the lonely young prospector, old Pop seemed to bring luck; the same day the oldster was able to hobble about the cabin, Steve found yellow in his wash-pan. After that, things went fine, with Pop Tweedy doing the cooking and Steve adding weight to the big leather poke.

No two people ever hit it off better than Steve and Pop. Pop was grateful to Steve for saving his life and for giving him a place to live where he could earn his keep and feel like he was wanted; Steve was grateful for Pop's company. But there was more than this to their mutual liking. To Steve, Pop was a dead-ringer for his grandfather, whom Steve had loved; and to Pop, Steve was the kind of a man he'd always wanted his own grandson to be. As it was, Sonny, as the old man called his grandson, but who was better known as The Midnight Kid, had been a heart-breaking disappointment.

OUTSIDE, the riders had pulled to a stop, and Steve turned from the rain-washed window and went to the door, thinking how good it was to see another human being. He'd been alone the last two days, for Pop Tweedy had taken the pack mule and Steve's saddle pony and had gone on the long trip to Dog Wood for supplies.

Steve heard the men's booted feet strike the mud. Grinning a little, he opened the door. He guessed the men would be as glad to find shelter as he was to see another face besides his own homely mug that looked back sourly at him from the cracked mirror over the washstand.

The two men were waiting for him, and each held a sixgun.

"Reach!" the taller of the two men grated.

Steve reached, while his heart zigzagged into high gear. The tall man had balls of ice for eyes with glittering yellow specks coming and going in them. Below a nose that slanted to the left, he wore a week's growth of black whiskers, and the little finger of the hand that held the gun stood out straight and stiff as if the joints had frozen that way.

Without wasting words, the two men sidled into the cabin and let their eyes rove about. All the time, their guns never wavered from Steve's middle.

The shorter man grinned. Fascinated, Steve stared at the man's flat ugly face. He'd never seen a grin like that.

"Looks like this dump's made to order, Brill," the short man sid.

The tall man, Brill, nodded, shifted his gun to the other hand and scratched his whiskery chin with the stiff little finger.

"Reckon it is, Fish-face," he agreed. "I guess nobody'll ever come here, lookin' for us. And,"—his yellow-flecked eyes settled on Steve's tight face, "looks like we got us a right fair housekeeper to look after us while we're here."

The fish-mounted man put his sixgun away, took off his hat and slapped the water from it with his stubby-fingered right hand.

"Guess it won't do no harm to search this hombre for guns," he muttered.

HE PUT his hat back on his dirty-red hair and stepped around Steve and came in back of him. He didn't find any gun. The only gun Steve owned was an old Sharps, and it stood in a far corner of the room. The man emptied Steve's pockets, taking his jacknife, watch and a billfold with three dollars in it.

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(Continued From Page 99)

Fish-face grinned.

"Noticed someone's been diggin' around the creek," Brill said. "It could be he's got some dust hid around."

"We'll have us a look-see 'fore we pull out," the short man said.

He picked up the Sharps, unloaded it and put the shells into his pocket.

"I'll go look after the hosses," he went on. "In the meantime, you might get this jasper busy fixin' some grub."

"A good idea," Brill nodded. "An' maybe you ought to bring in the money. I like to have it where I can see it."

The short man went out into the rain and came back with a saddle bag.

Brill took the bag, and the yellow flecks in his eyes danced like tiny devils. He lifted his eyes to Steve's face and pointed with the stiffened little finger.

"I'll lay the cards on the table o's you'll know where we all stand," he said flatly. "Fish-face an' me robbed the Hollister Bank. We had to shoot our way out, an' some people got hurt bad. We shook the posse, an' have come here to rest up for a day or so. We don't aim to be caught, an' we don't aim to take no foolishness from you. While we're here, you'll do the work. When we get ready to move on, we ain't leavin' you alive to tell anyone we've been through here. Any questions?"

"No questions," he said in a voice that strangely enough sounded like his own.

"Then get busy with the grub," Brill ordered.

Steve got busy, digging into the few remaining rations, feeling grateful as he worked that he'd let old Pop Tweedy go to Dog Wood for supplies. If the men didn't stay more than a night, they'd likely be gone before the old man returned. Steve didn't want old Pop hurt.

In a few minutes, Steve had the cabin filled with the smell of bacon and frying potatoes. As he worked, he searched vainly for a way out of this. As long as he was alive, he

guessed there was hope. And he had a reasonable chance of staying alive until morning. But then—

Thinking of the death sentence that Brill had pronounced, he shuddered and dropped a fork. As he stooped to pick it up, he shot a glance at the tall bandit. Brill's yellowish eyes were fastened on him. Steve reckoned he knew now how a mouse must feel that has been caught by a full-stomached cat that wants to play awhile before making the kill.

THE SHORT-LEGGED Fish-face came back into the house after caring for the horses.

"A right fair shed for the hosses," he said to Brill. "Looks like he's been keepin' two critters there, but I couldn't find none around."

He turned on Steve, his lips lifting in the center.

"Where's your animals, hombre?" he asked.

"Gone," Steve answered shortly.

Brill had been poking around the room. He turned with an extra pair of Pop Tweedy's socks in his hand.

"These look kinda little for you," he said to Steve. "Reckon you got a partner. An' I reckon he's someplace with your hosses." He lifted the gun, and his stiff finger pointed at Steve like the finger of death. "Speak up, feller," he went on harshly, "or we may decide to do our own cookin', beginnin' here an' now!"

"Yeah," Steve husked, "I got a partner. An old man. He went to Dog Wood day before yesterday for supplies. Won't be back for another couple of days."

"You sure he won't be back till then?" Brill grated.

"Sure," Steve answered, and hoped he was right.

The two outlaws sat down at the table, facing each other across it. Brill laid his gun beside his plate.

"Just to show him there's more'n one way to skin a cat," he said, winking at Brill.

Steve brought the steaming food over to the table, thinking that if he should spill some coffee down Brill's

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

skinny neck, he might be able to grab the gun. However when he reached the table, Brill picked up the gun.

"Careful, hombre," the man said. "An' don't walk around back of me."

Steve set the food on the table.

"Smells good," Fish-face grinned.

Brill wagged the gun at Steve.

"You can set down."

Inside, he had a weak, hopeless feeling. Things like this just didn't happen—yet, they had happened. And to him, without it being any fault of his.

The rain washed against the window and hissed down the hot stovepipe. The light outside was beginning to fail, turning the inside of the cabin to a dreary gray. The men wolfed their food, discussing between helpings their plans for crossing the border and spending the loot.

AT LAST, Brill shoved back from the table, belched loudly and turned his yellowish eyes on Steve.

"This partner of yours," he said. "old or young"

"I told you once," Steve said. "Old."

"Reckon we can stay on tomorrow," Fish-face said. "An' tomorrow night. If we like, we can take care of the old man an' stay on as long as we want."

Brill began to roll a cigarette.

"We're safe enough here," he said, "with everybody thinkin' we went the other way. But,"—the yellow devils in his eyes danced, "I'd like to get some'ers where this money will do us some good. I want to have some fun."

Both men eyed Steve speculatevely.

"We'll have to hog-tie him," Brill sid, "so's we won't have to worry about him while we sleep.'

"First," Fish-face suggested, "let's have a look-see at the money. I'm dyin' to know just how much we got."

Brill lifted the saddle bag to the table and opened it.

Steve's eyes turned to the window. If he could only get outside for a moment and slip into that stretch of timber that flanked the creek—

RIPPLE CREEK REDEMPTION

What he saw through the window cut his thinking short. His loaded pack mule stood out there in the rain, swishing his short stubby tail and ducking his head against the wind.

Steve felt ripples of cold chase up and down his back. Old Pop had made a flying trip to Dog Wood and back. And the reward for his hurry would be just one thing—death at the hands of Brill and Fish-face.

He gripped the side of the chair seat with one hand and the back with the other. The moment Pop opened that door, he would hurl the chair straight at the two men sitting at the table. Then he'd kick over the stove and trust to luck, his long legs and his youthful strength to get himself and old Pop out of there during the resulting confusion. Once he and Pop got into that stretch of timber—

But Pop didn't walk right in. Instead, he knocked at the door.

Steve's faint hopes sank to zero. By knocking, Pop had taken away his one chance—the element of surprise.

The two outlaws jerked to their feet, but they didn't lose their heads. Brill centered his gun on Steve, while Fish-face, gun in hand, turned his attention to the door. The knock came again, loud, persistent.

Why, Steve thought, would Pop knock? Had he forgotten he lived here, that this was home?

"Come in," Fish-face said.

THE DOOR opened, and a little wind and rain came through it. Steve could feel the wind about his neck. It was cold. The rain spotted the floor, making a darkening half-circle in front of the door.

Beyond the door, stood a man. A tall man, wearing a black hat. And muddy black boots. Between the boots and hat were black chaps and a black coat. Hanging from both shoulders on black, shell-studded belts that crossed in front and back and sagged low were a pair of black-handled sixguns.

Black as midnight he was, except for the white of his face and hands and the edging of yellow hair that

(Continued On Page 104)

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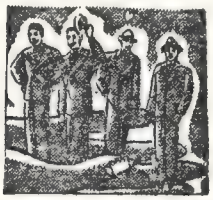

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lay beneath his black hat. Steve had never seen him before, but he knew him instantly. Sonny. Old Pop had called this man. "Cutest little feller with curly yellow hair an' eyes that laughed—"

But there was no laughter in Sonny Tweedy's eyes now.

"Come on in, mister," Fish-face said with a lift of his gun.

The Midnight Kid came into the room, his right hand holding the door open a few inches, his black-booted feet wide-spread in the half-circle of raindrops. His cold blue eyes whipped over the room, resting momentarily on the short man's fishy mouth and on Brill's stiff little finger.

Smiling crookedly, the Kid turned to Steve.

"Looks like I stepped into a hornets' nest," he said his voice strangely like old Pop's.

"Looks like it," Steve husked.

"You're Stevie, I reckon," the Kid went on quietly. "Grandpop told me all about you. He had a little hard luck back in Dog Wood. Twisted that bad ankle again an'—"

"You talk too much," Fish-face cut in.

The Midnight Kid let his cold blue eyes slide over the fish-mouthed little man.

"Got you in a jam, have they Stevie?" he asked softly. "Goin' to kill you, maybe?"

"Who are you?" Fish-face asked.

The Midnight Kid ignored the question. He pulled the door to slowly, shutting out the light behind him. With the door closed, he seemed to become a part of the darkened wall, except for his hands and face and slitted eyes.

Steve's eyes fixed on those white hands. Inside, he could feel his heart hammering gainst his ribs.

"My Grandpop liked you a hell of a lot, Stevie," the Kid said softly. "He wouldn't want you hurt, I know."

Steve saw the white hands drop to the black-butted sixguns, saw a blur of movement that was instantly blot-

(Continued On Page 106

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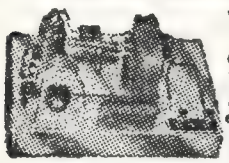

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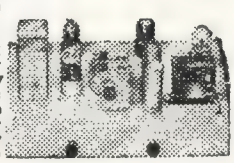

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ted out by the lifting of the big guns. At that instant, he hurled the chair at the short-legged outlaw.

IT WAS THE chair that made it possible for the Kid to unleather his guns. Fish-face's bullet went wild and the man went down with the the Kid's lead tearing through his splintered chair on his shoulders and heart. Then Brill's gun flamed, and the Kid lost his hat, staggered and slid to his knees. His gun lifted and flamed, and Brill cried out and fell against the table. The Kid fired again, and the table split in the middle and let Brill and the money sag to the floor.

The Kid staggered to his feet, but he couldn't stay on them, so he settled back to the floor again.

Steve ran over to him. The Kid grinned up and shook his curly blond head wearily.

"Guess this is it, Stevie," he said. "But maybe I've paid you a little for what you done for my old Grandpop."

He coughed, and a fleck of blood appeared on his lips.

"Word reached me," he went on weakly, "that my Grandpop had got lost. I come to look for him. Met up with him in Dog Wood. All packed an' ready to come back here— but he had twisted that ankle an' couldn't ride. Told me all about you—Stevie. Said you needed the supplies. Said for—me to take 'em to you. Said—"

The Midnight Kid closed his blue eyes.

"Always thought a lot of Grandpop," he whispered. "Always wanted to be the kind of a man he wanted me to—but seems like I kept—gettin' in deeper an' deeper. You're his kind—Stevie. You—"

"Take it easy," Steve said. "Don't try to talk."

"Live by the sixgun—die by the sixgun—Grandpop always said." The Kid's voice was thick. "Better this way, I guess—than by hangin'. You tell Grandpop—"

That was as far as the Kid got.

(Continued On Page 112)

THE REAL WEST

by El Amigo

THERE WAS GOLD in the hills all right, and plenty of it. Men washed as much as a thousand dollars worth of dust a day out of the streams that rushed down the mountain sides. But they washed it away as fast in the foothills, where half the goldrush fortunes were made by men and women who never saw a rocker, and never touched a pan.

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(Continued On Page 108)

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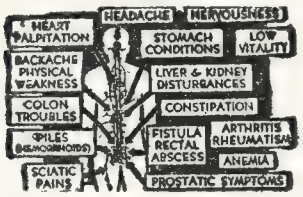

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THE REAL WEST

(Continued From Page 107)

a pound, flour for a buck and a half, and pork for a straight two smackerooes per pound of flesh, blood, bone, and fat. A breakfast served in Sacramento that summer brought in a grand sum total of $43, for a pound of bread, a pound of butter, half a pound of cheese, one box of sardines, and two bottles of ale. Disregarding the dietitian's attitude toward this tidbit, and treating it just as a collection of foodstuffs rather than a breakfast, it's hardly surprising that the quickest way to get rich in a goldmine was by not mining.

That, of course, was just at the very beginning, before supplies began to pour in. One amusing note of the period was the servant problem. There were already a few wealthy families established on the coast, some American and some Spanish. It was as distressing to the Nordics as it was to the Latins to discover, almost overnight, that there was no longer any such thing as a servant in the gold region. Any able-bodied person preferred to work at the mines and in the rich streams. The result was that patricians who had never done menial work in their lives began picking up brooms between their beringed fingers, and polishing their own boots with once-manicured hands. One diary of the period speaks unhappily of a lady "whose honeymoon is still full of soft seraphic light, unhouseling a potatoe."

The potatoe she was unhouseling was an expensive proposition, too, even in '49, when goods were beginning to catch up a little with needs. The Eldorado Hotel at Hangtown, near Coloma, listed on its menu, "two potatoes, medium size, $ .50." The same hotel served "hash, low grade, $.75," as opposed to "hash, 18 carats, $1." Rice pudding with molasses also brought a buck, but a square meal, the menu assured the hotel's visitors, could be had for the flat sum of three dollars, "Payable in advance. Gold Scales at the end of the bar."

The only thing that started cheap, stayed cheap, and absolutely *had* to be cheap was whiskey. One bill from a general store in Hangtown, that same

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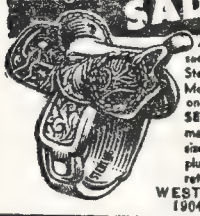

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(Continued From Page 108)

year, gives a bit of swift comparison. A plug of tobacco was fifty cents; a pie cost a dollar; drinks came to two bits a shot. The only catch was that for the drinks you paid cash.

THE COMBINATION of fabulous wealth to be had for the taking, and only the most primitive of civilized comforts to buy with it, "many an hombre with as much gold as he could cary, whose skin peeped out through many a rent," created fantastic contrasts and paradoxes in everyday life. The two-dollar rice-pudding with brandy sauce of the Eldorado at Hangtown was a peak in pastry for California, and the daily diet of a miner was likely to consist of no greater variety than beans, flapjacks, and dried beef. Yet on his visits to town, he would roll in a luxury of liquor and edibles, devouring vast quantities of meat, pies, and whiskey, in the absence of more subtle delicacies . . . but taking what he could get in such enormous amounts as to give his feast a genuinely Bacchanalian flavor.

The United States Hotel, at Spanish Bar in Grass Valley was typical. It was nothing but the largest in a row of dingy canvas houses along a river bank. Its chief distinction was that it boasted two rooms. . the bar about twenty feet square, and the dining room, a little larger. In this canvas-enclosed space, miners from miles around would congregate for a feast after days of a beans-and-spuds diet.

Men would start to collect in the bar before noon, drinking and talking, but mostly just waiting, pressing against the door to the dining room, which was kept rigidly locked until the last minute so as to give anyone a fair chance. When the door was flung open, there would be a grand rush for seats. The two tables could accomodate only fifty or sixty men, and the slowest to reach a seat would simple have to wait for the second serving. After the first shift was done, the door was shut again, while the tables were cleared and replen-

ished, and generally, there was as much of a rush the second time as there had been the first. One guest at the United States Hotel, after waiting out the first serving, described his participation in the second rush into what he insisted on calling the "Banqueting hall."

"I labored under the disadvantage of not knowing the diggings; being a stranger, I did not know the lay of the tables, or whereabouts the joints were placed; but immediately on entering, I caught sight of a good-looking roast of beef at the far end of one of the tables, at which I made a desperate charge I was not so green as to lose time in trying to get my legs over the bench and sit down, and in so doing, perhaps be crowded out altogether; but I seized a knife and fork, with which I took firm hold on my prize, and occupying as much space as possible with my elbows, I gradually insinuated myself into a seat . . . conversation, of course, was out of the question; but if you asked a man to pass you a dish, he did so with pleasure, devoting one hand to your service, while with his knife or fork, as it might be, in the other, he continued to convey the contents of his plate to their ultimate destination. . ."

This was the "banqueting hall." And it was typical. Men killed themselves in the mines, came in town with their money, and tossed it furiously about to get the best of the poor supplies and pleasures that were available to them. The gold came easily out of the earth, but it slipped as easily out of the palm. It was a rare prospector who left the gold fields richer than he had come.

THE QUICK RICHES of '49 and '50, however, couldn't hold out for any length of time. Where millions of dollars had poured out of the earth in the first few months, the flow in the fifties slowed down to a steady trickle. A man could make a good living placer-mining, if he worked hard, and he just *might* hit a bonanza somewhere, but the hundreds of thousands of immigrants

(Continued On Page 112)

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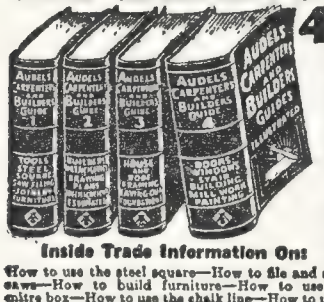

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REAL WESTERN

(Continued From Page 111)

quickly cleaned out the richest sources.

In the meantime, the biggest problem of the early days was every day being simplified. Communication and transportation took giant steps forward, and by the middle of the fifties, the desperate shortages that had met the first frantic rush of miners were entirely a thing of the past. Prices were lower but still a miner had little chance of hanging onto his poke. Now, if his dust survived the gambling houses, it stood little chance of living through the attacks of loose women and lawless men. One man who spent three months mining along the Yuba River, to make a grand sum total of ninety-three cents, wrote in disgust:

"I will say, that I have seen purer liquors, better segars, finer tobaccos, truer guns and pistols, larger dirks and bowie-knives, and prettier courtezans here, than in any other place I have ever visited; and it is my unbiased opinion that California can and does furnish the best bad things that are obtainable in America . . ."

THE END

RIPPLE CREEK REDEMPTION

(Continued From Page 106)

Steve shoved to his feet and looked about the cabin. Brill and Fish-face hadn't moved. They'd never move again.

Steve ended a shudder with a little sigh. He had three graves to dig. It didn't matter much where he put two of them, he guessed. But the third he'd put under that tree where he'd found old Pop Tweedy. Pop would like that. My lucky tree, he'd called it.

Then, after digging the graves and returning the money to the bank, he'd ride over to Dog Wood and get old Pop. And he'd tell Pop that the poet was right—that there's always a little good in the worst of us.

Smiling a little, Steve went out to the shed for his shovel, knowing that the few years left for Pop Tweedy would be easier because of the way things had worked out.

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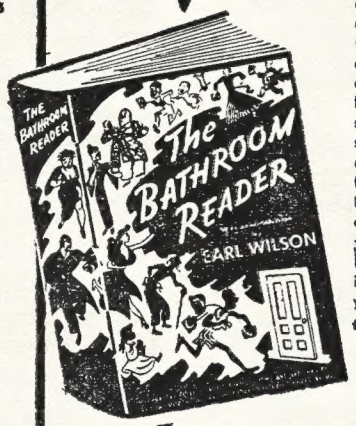

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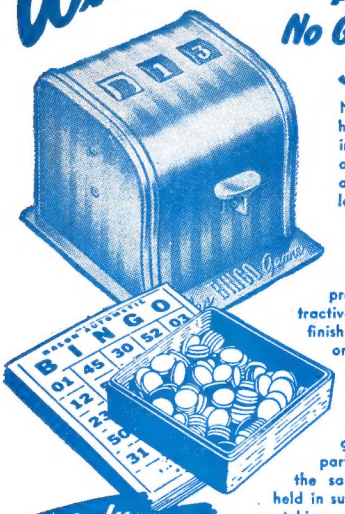

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Furnished complete with master chart, good supply of BINGO cards and fibre markers . . . sufficient for 15 players. BINGO furnished complete, ready to play, for only $2.98. Pay postman price plus postage or send $3.00 now and we pay postage.

If you prefer to send $3.00 now, we will pay postage.

Only $2.98 Complete

Fully Guaranteed to Please or full refund of purchase price within 5 days

FIFTH AVE. MDSE. MART, Dept. B10
150 Nassau Street, New York 7, N. Y.

Send complete "BINGO" outfit by return mail. It is understood if I am not delighted after 5 days, I may return for full refund of purchase price.

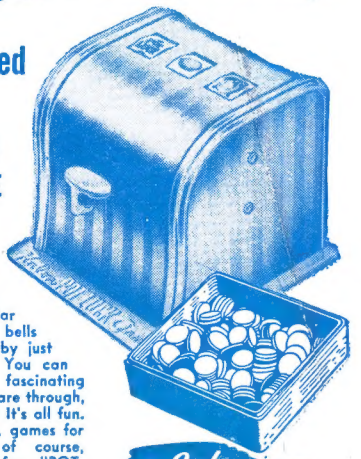
( ) Send C. O. D. I will pay $2.98 plus postage.
( ) Enclosed find $3.00 in full payment. Subject to same guarantee.
( ) Send 2 complete outfits, special price $5.50 plus postage.

NAME.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

Get Thrills of Gambling Without Losing Money!

Newly Invented Portable Slot Machine

FUN TO HIT THE JACKPOT



At last, you can have all the thrills of winning with "POT-LUCK" . . . the familiar symbols of cherries, bells and lemons turn up by just pushing the plunger. You can play for hours. A fascinating enjoyment. When you are through, you don't lose a cent! It's all fun. Wonderful for parties, games for the children, and of course, grown-ups will go for "POT-LUCK" in a big way! Hit the "jackpot," and gather in your chips.

Nothing Else to Buy. "POT-LUCK" is sent to you complete with chips and instructions. Durably made of heavy pressed steel finished with alternate bright-nickel and dull satin stripes. Take it with you on trips or use it at parties for amazing enjoyment. Guaranteed to please or REFUND OF PURCHASE PRICE IN 5 DAYS.

Only $2.98 Complete

SEND NO MONEY

Send name and address today. We will ship "POT-LUCK" complete with chips, instructions, etc., by return mail. Pay postman $2.98 plus postage. If you prefer to save postage, enclose $3 now.

FIFTH AVE. MDSE. MART, Dept. PL10
150 Nassau St., New York 7, N. Y.

Send complete "POT-LUCK" outfit by return mail. It is understood if I am not delighted after 5 days, I may return for full refund of purchase price.

( ) Send C. O. D. I will pay $2.98 plus postage.
( ) Enclosed find $3.00 in full payment. Subject to same guarantee.
( ) Send 2 complete outfits, special price $5.50 plus postage.

NAME.....
ADDRESS.....
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Lady Godiva RIDES AGAIN

WHILE HER HORSE DISPENSES CIGARETTES

You'll laugh! You'll howl! You'll be the most amazed person in the world when you see this new side-splitting novelty cigarette dispenser. Here is famous Lady Godiva, painted in natural flesh-colored tones, riding her white horse. When you've finished admiring Lady Godiva's eye-filling pin-up girl beauty, push the horse's head down. Right before your eyes . . . a cigarette pops out of the horse's tail! Pull the head a dozen times . . . each time another cigarette pops out, without refilling. You'll have a belly-laugh every time and so will your friends and family. Stand it in your den, office or living room and see the sensation it creates. It's almost unbelievable!

EXAMINE WITHOUT RISK
Send NO MONEY

The effect of this exciting novelty has to be seen to be believed. That's why we invite you to examine it at home, without risk. SEND NO MONEY . . . just name and address. On arrival pay postman only $1.98 plus postage, or enclose $1.98 with coupon and receive postpaid. You must be tickled pink with this famous 8-inch high pin-up girl and her strange horse, or return in 10 days for full purchase refund. Order TODAY!

NO-RISK TRIAL COUPON

5th Ave. Merch. Mart., Dept. GOJ14
150 Nassau St., New York 7, N. Y.

☐ Rush . . . Lady Godiva's Cigarette Dispensers. On arrival, I will pay postman only $1.98 each plus postage.
☐ I enclose $1.98 each for..... dispensers. You pay postage. In either case I may return in 10 days for refund, if not satisfied.

NAME .....
ADDRESS .....
CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

Join the Hundreds of Thousands of Men Who...

Appear SLIMMER... Feel Better...Look Younger WITH "COMMANDER"

..."The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter"

YES, INSTANTLY, you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's Abdominal Supporter. Look and feel younger!

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY—ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE

The COMMANDER presents the new exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Try COMMANDER yourself.

Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" and "in trim" at once.

BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET

The helpful and uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The very instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER

The COMMANDER braces your figure . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement in your appearance immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN

The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's athletic type pouch which is completely detachable. Takes just a moment to detach for washing or replacing with another. It gives genuine male protection. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW! Just mail coupon.

BEFORE AFTER

"MAKE THIS TEST YOURSELF"

...and feel what we mean by "THE SECRET OF THE INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Clasp hands over abdomen, as pictured, then raise and press gently against it. Notice how much better you feel! Only COMMANDER contains the new principle, the interlocking hands, for firm support. A porous non-stretch material is built into the special stretchy body of COMMANDER, designed in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE Support where needed most. No Buckles, Laces or Straps.

Improve Your Appearance INSTANTLY!

Notice how you immediately take on a more youthful, more athletic looking appearance —with the COMMANDER. This amazing supporter gives you control firm enough to support abdominal sag, yet gentle enough to make wearing the COMMANDER a pleasure.

Commander Wearers All Over America Say—

"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
—Dr. C. G. S., Illinois

"I must write and tell you how well pleased I am with your supporter. It is giving me so much comfort."
—M. A. Z., Bethlehem, Pa.

"Enclosed please find an order for two more. I am using the Commander right now and am well satisfied. It is the most practical belt I have ever had."
—E. W., Chicago, Ill.

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had."
—Dr. A. M. S., Mich.

"I purchased a belt for my husband which has proved to be the most wonderful thing he has ever worn. I wish I could put into words how much better he looks and feels."
—(Mrs.) R. E. M., Phila., Pa.

Above are just a few of many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

FREE 10 Day Trial!

If it fails to do all we say send it back and the purchase price will be promptly refunded

Only $2.98

Special Large Sizes 48 to 60 $3.93 — Size 28 to 47

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WARD GREEN CO., DEPT. B451
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Send me the "COMMANDER" for ten days' trial. I will pay postman special price of $2.98 plus postage. If not satisfied after wearing it ten days, I may return it and purchase price will be promptly refunded.

My waist measure is..... My height is.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... Zone.... State.....

☐ Check here if you enclose $2.98 with this order and we will pay postage charges. The same refund offer holds.

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